Yuri Kitayama
Illustrator • Riv
17
Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles
Saint's Gospel

"HARUTO MADE IT. HE'S REALLY KNOWLEDGE ABLE ABOUT THINGS LIKE THIS."
"DOESN'T HE HAVE TOO MUCH KNOWLEDGE?"

Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles

Rio's eyes widened at the unexpected sensation pressing against his back. Since Sara and the others were in front of him, the only one who could possibly be there was Miharu—but that was exactly what was surprising to Rio. Miharu had never tried to cling to him before; he couldn't help turning his head to look behind him.
"I-I WOULD APPRECIATE IT... IF YOU DIDN'T LOOK BEHIND YOU..."

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Rio (Haruto Amakawa)

The main character of this story; he lives to avenge his mother's murder. Currently traveling as "Haruto" due to his arrest warrant issued in the Beltrum Kingdom. In his previous life, he was a Japanese university student named Amakawa Haruto.

Aishia

Rio's contract spirit who calls him Haruto. A rare humanoid spirit with missing memories.

Celia Claire

Noblewoman from the Beltrum Kingdom. A genius sorcerer and Rio's former academy teacher.

Latifa

A werefox girl from the spirit folk village. In her previous life, she was an elementary school student named Endo Suzune.

Sara

A silver werewolf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.

Alma

An elder dwarf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.

Orphia

A high elf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.

Ayase Miharu

A high school student from another world. Haruto's childhood friend and first love.

Sendo Aki

A middle school student from another world. Feels resentment towards her half-brother Haruto.

Sendo Masato

An elementary school student from another world. Currently under the protection of Rio, along with Miharu and Aki.

CHARACTER INTRODUCTION

Flora Beltrum
Second Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Finally reunited with her older sister, Christina.

Christina Beltrum
First Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Protected by Rio, together with Flora.

Roanna Fontaine
Noblewoman from the Beltrum Kingdom. Traveling with Sakata Hiroaki as his attendant.

Sakata Hiroaki
A hero from another world. Operates with the support of Duke Huguenot.

Shigekura Rui
A high school student from another world. The hero of the Beltrum Kingdom.

Kikuchi Renji
One of the heroes from another world. An adventurer unaffiliated with any kingdom, until...

Liselotte Cretia
Noblewoman from the Galarc Kingdom and president of the Ricca Guild. She was a high school student named Minamoto Rikka in her past life.

Sendo Takahisa
Aki and Masato's brother from their original world. Currently the hero of the Centostella Kingdom.

Sumeragi Satsuki
Miharu's friend from their original world. Currently the hero of the Galarc Kingdom.

Charlotte Galarc
Second Princess of the Galarc Kingdom. Shows strong affection towards Haruto.

Reiss
A mysterious man pulling the strings behind the scenes. Wary of Rio for always disrupting his plans.

Lucius
Commander of the mercenary squad, The Heavenly Lions. Killed in a battle with Rio.

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Prologue: Vow

I hate it.
This world.
Everything in it.
I hate it all.
That’s why I decided...why I made a vow.
On that day, I realized that kindness was just an ideal.
It was the moment I lost everything without any reason.
I was betrayed and had everything snatched away from me.
So, I made a vow to end this world, riddled with foolish humans.
To take vengeance.
That was something I was capable of.
I had the right to do it.
I had the vexing power to make it possible.
That’s why I’ll destroy it all.
There’s no worth in a world like this.
The die has already been cast by none other than my own hand.
That’s why I couldn’t turn back anymore.
I had no intention of turning back anyway.
I cannot forgive this world. These humans.
And more than anything, I couldn’t forgive myself.
That’s why I desperately...
Charged towards ruin.
That was my punishment.
For not being able to save someone...

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Chapter 1: Life in the Galarc Kingdom

Meanwhile, in the mansion Rio was given by King Francois as Haruto Amakawa, honorary knight...

Ten days had passed since Rio started living with the members of the stone house. It was past noon, and Charlotte was once again visiting the estate. Satsuki, Liselotte, Christina, and Flora accompanied her.

Charlotte wet her throat with the tea that was served, then addressed Rio and Celia seated across from her sofa. “I am here today to give you two a job request.”

“Us?” Rio and Celia exchanged a look before answering together.

“Yes. It’s an official request from the kingdom, so you’ll naturally be compensated for it. The terms of work can be limited to while you’re in the capital. If you could give it your consideration with these details in mind, I would appreciate it,” Charlotte said, prefacing her explanation with emphasis that the job was voluntary.

“What kind of job is it...?”

“I’d like the two of you to become temporary instructors. I’m hoping for Lady Celia to hold a special class on sorcery at the Galarc Royal Academy, while Sir Haruto teaches close combat to a class prepared by us.”

“I understand Celia with her lecturer experience from the Beltrum Royal Academy, but I’ve never taught a class before.”

“Hee hee, that is a needless fear. I’m positive teaching won’t be a problem for someone of your abilities.” Rio was unsure of himself, but Charlotte gave her approval with full confidence.

“It’s a great honor to hear that, but I am unfamiliar with the sword styles and martial arts of the Galarc Kingdom.”

“That isn’t a problem either. What I’m requesting isn’t for you to teach technical basics to beginners, but to give more practical instruction to people with combat experience. There’ll be people specializing in various weapons and styles of fighting.”

“I see...” Rio muttered in thought.

He had previously taught Masato, who was completely new to combat, as well as the warriors of the spirit folk village, who had no experience in hand-to-hand combat due to their lack of infighting. But teaching the career soldiers of Galarc and the Restoration who already possessed all the required knowledge would be a different matter. Of course, there'd probably be people of nobility among them, so he wasn't sure how much he'd be able to teach them.

"I know you have a strong sense of responsibility, so I understand if you won't agree without careful consideration. But you don't have to think so hard about it—you can treat it like a mock battle or a light sparring match. The reason why this job came up this time is because many have expressed a desire to spar with the Honorary Knight Sir Haruto."

"While I wouldn't refuse a light sparring match...do you know roughly how many people will be in attendance at this class?"

"I'm thinking of limiting it to a maximum of twenty people at first. I imagine whoever is free at the time will be in attendance, but I will take responsibility for the selection of attendees, so you don't need to worry in that regard."

Charlotte grinned boldly, as though to say she wouldn't allow anyone to pull anything funny. As one would expect, she had considered all the points Rio could possibly find concerning. Rio was impressed by her prudence, and his expression softened in amusement.

"It may be better to reduce that number if I'm to face everyone myself, but if the attendees don't mind sparring with each other, then that works too."

"Whether it's one-on-one, or an all-out brawl, I'll leave it to you to decide based on the number of attendees at the class at the time."

"I see. In that case..."

It may be possible to maintain a proper lecture format that way. Whether the attendees will be satisfied with that is a different matter, though...

"For now, the attendees of the first class are pretty much decided already, so how about you give it a try? You can decide if you want to continue with future classes after that," Charlotte suggested.

Apparently, she had arranged everything regarding the first class in preparation for Rio's agreement. Since she had gone through so much trouble before approaching with the request, Rio found it hard to refuse. Or rather, he found himself wanting to repay her for her consideration.

“I understand... I’ll give it a try,” Rio said, accepting the request.

“Thank you. I believed you would say that, Sir Haruto. In that case, the first class will be held—I’m so pleased. I can’t wait to see your gallant figure again,” Charlotte smiled in delight. Charlotte replied gleefully, smiling in delight.

“You’re in high spirits, Char.”

“Hee hee. You said it’d be interesting yourself, Lady Satsuki.”

Satsuki had been sitting in silence as they talked but joined the conversation with a giggle. Charlotte had also given her reply in a cheery mood.

“Incidentally, who’ll be attending the first class?” Rio asked, looking at Satsuki.

“First, Lady Satsuki will be there. Attending from Galarc will be several of my knights and Liselotte’s attendants. Some of Princess Christina and Princess Flora’s female knights will also be attending from the Restoration side,” Charlotte answered with a look at Christina and Liselotte.

“Princess Charlotte approached us with the offer. The Restoration will attend through Vanessa and some of her subordinates. They may cause you trouble, but please guide them well, Sir Amakawa,” Christina said with a nod.

“A few of my attendants who accompanied me to the capital will also be in attendance. Please teach them as well,” Liselotte continued with a bow.

“Which means there’ll be some familiar faces...” Rio was a little bothered by how they were all women. “I understand. I don’t know how well I’ll be able to teach them, but I’ll do my best,” he replied, straightening himself and nodding.

“As long as it’s okay with you, I’d like the first class to be held in a few days. Would that suit your circumstances? I’m thinking of holding it in the morning, after breakfast and before the afternoon...”

“I’ll be free as early as tomorrow at that time.”

“Really? Then let’s hold it tomorrow! If the others in your mansion would like to watch or participate, we can hold it in the square in the rear garden. I’ll drop by around nine o’clock in the morning.” Charlotte looked around at Latifa and everyone present.

“Yes! I’d love to go and watch!” Latifa raised her hand energetically.

“If Haruto’s teaching, I’d like to attend as a student.”

“I’m also interested.”

Sara raised her hand shyly, followed closely by Alma.

“The two of you are most welcome to join. That is fine, right?” Charlotte agreed readily, checking with Rio for confirmation.

“Yes, of course. In that case, you can take the class for most of the time, but could you act as my assistants when I need help?”

“Sure!” Sara agreed.

“Leave it to us,” Alma added.

“Aishia, you too.”

“Yup.” Aishia nodded without hesitation.

“That settles the matter of Sir Haruto’s special instruction. Lady Celia, what will you do about yours?” Charlotte summarized in satisfaction, then turned to Celia.

“There are a few things I’d like to confirm, but the fact that Princess Christina is here means you’ve cleared this with her, right?”

“Yes. Or rather, you’ve been temporarily transferred to Sir Amakawa right now, so the decision is up to you two,” Christina answered.

“Thank you. What kind of subjects are you expecting me to cover?” Celia asked Charlotte.

“Any subject is fine, but your students will range from upper elementary- to middle school-aged. Each class can be a complete course, or you can take several classes to cover a topic if you prefer. We can discuss that after taking into consideration the duration of Sir Haruto’s stay in Galarc.”

“I plan on staying for another month. If Celia agrees to teaching, please plan around that schedule,” Rio explained.

“If you could proceed with the arrangement of the classes, I’ll start thinking about my lesson plans.”

Thus, Celia decided to hold her special lectures as well.

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The next morning, in order to take Rio’s close combat class, people who crossed organization borders gathered on the mansion grounds.

Galarc Kingdom’s Second Princess Charlotte walked in the lead, guiding them. She was accompanied by her attendants and female knights behind her. Walking beside her were the Restoration’s Christina and Flora. They were

similarly followed by their attendants and knights, including Vanessa. A little farther behind the princesses was Liselotte, daughter of Galarc's Duke Cretia. She was accompanied by her attendants who also acted as her guards—Aria, Cosette, and Natalie.

In front of the gate were two female knights from Galarc. Rio had no retainers, and the hero and princess of the kingdom often visited his mansion, so the area was guarded by the castle's knights.

Incidentally, since the mansion Rio was given was on the castle grounds, space was limited. Therefore, the mansion was located a stone's throw away from the front gate. Instead, the rear garden had a bigger private space away from the public eye, and there was more than enough room to hold a sparring match with weapons.

In preparation for the arrival of the guests, a gazebo was set up in the garden towards the front gate for Rio and the others to relax in. (Satsuki had stayed over the night before, so she was at the mansion already.)

"Welcome, everyone."

"Good morning, Sir Haruto. We've arrived as promised."

"I've been waiting."

Rio approached the group and placed his right hand over his chest, welcoming them.

"Let's get straight to the point. If the preparations are complete, please begin teaching."

Since they were limited on time, they got straight to business upon arrival.

"I understand. Please, follow me."

Rio led the party to the rear garden. There was an even larger gazebo in the back, which he stopped by first. Wooden weapons for the mock battles had been brought over the day before and were lined in front of the gazebo.

"Anyone who wishes to observe, please head under the gazebo. Those participating in the class, please select your best weapon out of those available and come this way."

Rio then picked up the wooden sword leaning beside him and walked a short distance away. Aishia and Satsuki picked up wooden spears and went after him, followed by Sara, who picked up two wooden daggers, and Alma, who chose a wooden mace.

Then, the rest of the participants, which included Vanessa, Aria, Cosette, Natalie, and the others, each selected their own weapon and followed them.

“Everyone else, please come this way.”

At Celia’s prompting, Charlotte and the others made their way under the gazebo. There was a table and chairs set up underneath where everyone other than the attendants sat down to watch Rio’s class.

In the meantime, the participants had already distanced themselves sufficiently from the gazebo.

“Around here should do.” Rio, who had been walking in the lead, came to a stop and turned around to face the knights and attendants. Aishia, Sara, and Alma stood beside him.

“It’s okay for me to be on this side, right?” Satsuki checked with Rio before lining up among Aria and the others.

“Yes.”

The participants are Satsuki, five knights from Galarc, five knights from the Restoration, and three of Liselotte’s attendants. Then there’s Aishia, Sara, and Alma. A total of seventeen people. And they’re really all women...

After looking around at everyone, Rio felt a little awkward. Being the only man in a group of women was rather wearing on the mind. The observers under the gazebo were also women, so he felt like he had walked into an all-girls school alone.

However, Rio guessed Charlotte had actually limited her selection of participants to women for his sake... Or rather, for the sake of Latifa and the others who were living in the mansion. After telling her they weren’t used to being around nobility, she probably assumed they’d be more comfortable around members of the same sex and acted out of consideration. The people here were also somewhat familiar faces that could usually be seen protecting Charlotte and Christina. That being said...

“My name is Haruto Amakawa. I am honored to be able to instruct you all in close combat at the request of Princess Charlotte.”

There were many he hadn’t spoken to before, so Rio gave a self-introduction. At that, the participants all drew their gazes to him. Some looked at him with curiosity, some looked at him with admiration, and some looked at him in evaluation.

“These three are my friends: Aishia, Sara, and Alma. They’ll be participating in the class as my assistants. We spar with each other on a regular basis, so I can guarantee that the three of them are good opponents. The hero, Lady Satsuki, will also be participating along with everyone.”

At Rio's introduction, Sara and Alma bowed their heads first.

"I'm Satsuki. I'd appreciate it if you interacted with me without all the stiff hero formalities. Nice to meet you," Satsuki said. However, the position of those present wouldn't allow them to accept her words so naively, and they all responded with a respectful bow of their heads.

I guess I'll have to work on the rest over the course of the sparring matches, Satsuki thought with a strained smile when she saw them react in such a way.

"The purpose of this class is to teach close combat, so I'm thinking of focusing the class on mock battles. To be honest, I don't have much confidence in my abilities to instruct everyone. But since I've agreed to do this already, I will take responsibility and do my best. Now... Our time is limited, so let's begin."

Rio declared the start of the lesson. He had thought of the lesson plan yesterday, but he lacked teaching experience. He had no choice but to figure things out as he went along. Now that he felt aware of that all over again, his expression stiffened with slight nervousness.

"I'd like to begin by measuring everyone's abilities, so I'm going to face each of you one by one. The match will be suspended as soon as I measure your strength, but can also end with an effective blow. So please come at me with the intention of hitting me. Magic and sorcery is allowed in the form of physical ability enhancement. The only necessity is a sign signaling the start, so will you be willing to act as umpire, Sara?"

"Yes. Leave it to me." Sara stepped forward at Rio's request. Hearing they would start with sparring made the participants all pull themselves together. They were probably drawn to the opportunity to spar with Rio, who had many military achievements under his belt. They wanted to measure his abilities just as much as—if not more than—he wanted to know theirs.

"Then, my first opponent will be..."

Rio looked around at the participants.

"Please allow me." One of the knights from the Galarc Kingdom immediately raised her hand. Everyone's attention gathered on her.

"You're..."

She seemed to be in her early twenties. She normally accompanied Charlotte around the place and left an impression on Rio for occasionally sending him scrutinizing looks.

“I’m Louise Sharon, knight of the Galarc Kingdom and captain of Princess Charlotte’s personal guards.”

“Then, first will be Dame Sharon. It’s nice to meet you...not for the first time, but I believe this is our first proper greeting. Let’s have a good match.”

“Agreed,” Louise replied to Rio with a light bow.

“This way, please.” Rio led her a short distance away from the rest of the group. Louise gazed at his back while following him—

Say, Louise. I want you to face Sir Haruto before anyone else tomorrow. If you lose to him as the captain, your entire squad will have to accept him, right?

—And recalled the words Charlotte had said to her yesterday. Her words didn’t hold an ounce of doubt for Haruto’s victory, but it didn’t hurt her pride as a soldier. As a knight, Louise Sharon considered her master’s words to be absolute. Whatever Charlotte said, went.

However, she did have thoughts about Haruto.

Sir Haruto Amakawa. The person Princess Charlotte loves...

Louise worshipped Charlotte. She was dotingly fond of her. She had been assigned to protect Charlotte since she was young, watching over her growth until now. She had kept her feelings secret to avoid disrespect, but there was no way she didn’t find her adorable. One could say she was in love with Charlotte—that was how much she felt for her. Yet when it came to Charlotte —

Say, Louise. When do you think Sir Haruto will return?

Say, Louise. Sir Haruto is really amazing.

Say, Louise. Sir Haruto mentioned this today...

With the face of an infatuated maiden, she only spoke of a single man to Louise every day. It was as though the one she loved had fallen in love with someone else—there was no way she felt indifferent to that.

Furthermore, Louise’s ardor had spread to her subordinates—all the knights protecting Charlotte had conflicted feelings about Rio.

Thus, Louise stared at Rio as though to say, “Can you really make Princess Charlotte happy? I won’t forgive you if you lay your hands on other women. Or rather, I won’t forgive you if you lay your hands on our adorable Princess Charlotte. Understood?” Her subordinates watched on from afar similarly.

Heh, things are about to get interesting. Charlotte saw through what her

guards were thinking and smiled in delight as she watched things unfold.

She's got a fierce look in her eyes... Rio had no idea what the knights were thinking but felt a little awkward when facing Louise's gaze.

"*Augendae Corporis*. Please enhance yourself too, Dame Sharon." He pulled himself together and recited the spell, activating the magic artifact he wore on his arm to enhance his physical abilities. A spell circle appeared, covering Rio's body in light. Using spirit arts would put him at a physical advantage, so he didn't just pretend to activate it before canceling it. He would fight on the same conditions.

"Okay. *Augendae Corporis*."

Louise didn't rely on an artifact like Rio and enhanced herself with magic.

"The rules are as I explained earlier. Feel free to use your weapon and fists to land one hit on me."

"Understood. I don't plan on holding back," she said without hostility, but she stared at Rio sharply as she nodded.

"Good. Please don't."

"..." Rio replied with a refreshing smile. That seemed to catch Louise by surprise, as she frowned a bit upon seeing it.

He didn't stop to think about the faint change in Louise's expression and addressed Sara instead. "Shall we begin, then? Sara. If you could give the signal to start."

"Okay. Begin when I count down from five. Are you ready?" Sara checked.

"Yes."

"At any time."

The two of them nodded.

"Five, four, three, two, one. Begin!"

Louise silently burst into a run as soon as the signal was given, approaching Rio. The distance between them had been five meters to start, but the gap was closed in an instant. She proceeded to swing her wooden sword in an efficient move, slashing at him. However, Rio had perfectly seen through her trajectory and stepped forward to parry Louise's sword before she could build up enough momentum. Louise had also shifted her center of gravity in order to step forward, so she was knocked off balance as soon as her sword was deflected, killing her momentum completely.

It was a perfectly timed parry. If it were one moment later, Louise would

have enough weight leaning forward to prevent herself from being knocked back.

Guh... This is bad. He's going to counterattack.

Louise broke out in a cold sweat, sensing her defeat early on in the match. However, Rio didn't step forward—on the contrary, he stepped back and adjusted his hold on his wooden sword.

"Why didn't you pursue me with a follow-up attack just now...?" Louise asked dubiously.

It was only for a brief moment, but she had been defenseless in the time it took her to regain balance. She knew Rio wasn't the kind of opponent who would let such an opening slip by based on his parry just now, which was why she found it questionable.

"This is a sparring match for me to learn your abilities, not to become victorious."

"Honestly, I felt quite a gap in ability just from that first blow... Though I charged at you with a test strike, my level of skill was shameful," Louise said with a vexed look. It was precisely because she was an experienced fighter that she could feel the differences in their skill all the more keenly.

"That's not true. It was a polished move with no movements put to waste. Although that just made the movement easier to predict... And if I had swung any later, I would have missed the timing to make a counterattack," Rio said matter-of-factly.

If his timing had been off by an instant, he would have lost the chance to counter. It's hard to believe he saw through the timing and swung his sword while aiming for it... But no matter how I look at it, he aimed for that moment. Just what kind of combat sense does he have? It's beyond what I imagined.

She had been swinging with her body physically enhanced, so the correct timing would've been shorter than a second. With that analysis, Louise fell speechless.

"If there's nothing else, let's resume the match. Feel free to come at me whenever."

"Fine..."

Louise nodded awkwardly, taking a deep breath to focus on the battle again.

◇ ◇ ◇

Rio sparred with the participants one after another. He had already finished matches against eleven of them, and he was yet to let anyone land a hit on him. Roughly half an hour later, he was sparring with Liselotte's attendant, Natalie, as his twelfth opponent.

He's fought against ten knights of Galarc and the Restoration in successive matches, yet he hasn't lost a single one. Duke Cretia's attendants are as skilled as the rumors said too...

Smiling, Louise had a look of half amazement and half shock as she intently observed Rio winning match after match. The other knights were also watching the battles quietly with serious expressions. Everyone present had diligently trained themselves as soldiers, so they were all vexed that they were no match for him and watched for any moves they could learn from him.

Meanwhile, Cosette and Aria were standing side by side to watch their colleague fight.

"Natalie's dancing in the palm of his hand."

"Just like you were moments ago, you mean," Aria pointed out.

Indeed, in Cosette's match with Rio, she had exerted all her stamina helplessly until the match ended without her ever making a comeback.

"Well, yeah. Still, I knew he was strong, but I didn't think he'd be this strong without his enchanted sword... The name he's made for himself is the real deal. His skills were beyond what I imagined when I fought him too. He's wonderful, honestly."

Cosette wasn't particularly bothered by how helpless she had been—in fact, she gazed at Rio dreamily as she spoke. Aria watched her colleague with a tired sigh.

"Of course he is. It'd be impossible to defeat the King's Sword with just an enchanted sword if you didn't have the sword skills to back it up. Talent and effort—you can only reach his level at such a young age when you're blessed with both these factors."

"A hardworking genius, huh? Does that mean a genius like you would be able to land a hit on him?"

"I'm not a genius, but there's also no telling until we actually cross swords." Aria frowned slightly, not particularly fond of being called a genius.

“It’ll be your turn next. The strongest, demon-like head attendant versus Sir Haruto. I’m looking forward to seeing who can best whom. Look, the match is almost over,” Cosette said as she watched on.

Natalie was closing in on Rio resolutely, dual wooden daggers wielded in her hands. Rio was holding back his counterattacks to observe her movements better, so the attacks were being dealt one-sidedly from Natalie’s side.

However, Rio continuously evaded her attacks with minimal movement, making him less out of breath than her despite being the one fighting one opponent after another. It was only a matter of time until their match would conclude.

“She’s getting worked up by the lack of opportunities to attack. She’s always hated losing.”

A regular bystander wouldn’t be able to tell Natalie was getting frustrated, as she was still swinging her dagger with a serious expression. But being that she was her colleague, Cosette could see through her.

“Let’s stop here.”

Rio lowered his sword, calling for the end of the match.

Natalie looked like she wanted to fight more, but her obedient personality made her lower her daggers without protest. She nodded after a pause. “All right.”

“I’m sure there’ll be more chances to spar in the future, so until then.” Rio seemed to sense some kind of emotion from Natalie’s expression, making him smile.

“R-Right.” Natalie nodded in embarrassment, noting the fact that she’d been seen through.

“Aria is last, then. Please come forward,” Rio shouted, calling Aria over from a fair distance away.

Shortly after, Aria took Natalie’s place in front of Rio, and they stood five meters apart from one another.

“Let’s have a good match.”

“Yes, let’s indeed.” Rio returned the polite bow Aria sent his way.

“Once you’re ready, we’ll begin at the count of five. Please enhance your physical abilities with magic or sorcery.”

“I’m ready whenever. *Augendae Corporis*.”

“I’m ready too. *Augendae Corporis*.”

“I’ll start the countdown then. Five, four, three, two, one. Begin!”

At Sara’s signal, the match began.

Aria immediately ran at Rio. The moment she did, she swung her wooden sword at him, catching him at just the right timing. Even an experienced warrior would have found such a movement difficult to react to, much less an amateur, but Rio deflected the attack with a swing of his blade. But blocking just the first attack wasn’t enough to stop Aria’s movements; with a swift and graceful arm, she swung her sword in another attempt to hit Rio. That movement even made Sara’s eyes widen in awe.

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As I expected, Aria really is the strongest of all the participants.

At the same time, Rio felt a keen sense of Aria's abilities firsthand. Liselotte's other attendants, Cosette and Natalie, had been at an even level with Vanessa and Louise, but Aria's swordsmanship was closer to Alfred's, the King's Sword. She had more than enough talent to be working as the head attendant of a duke's daughter.

Aria would need to face Aishia for a worthwhile match. Though Sara and Alma may put up a good fight if they team up together, Rio thought as he fended off Aria's attacks. It'd be a different matter if spirit arts were allowed, but Sara and Alma wouldn't be able to win under the same conditions alone. If he were to hold a series of battles to rank the participants with the exception of Aishia and himself, Aria would come out as the decisive winner, followed by Sara and Alma. Below them would be Natalie, Cosette, Vanessa, and Louise. After that would be the other knights.

Incidentally, when Satsuki tried to enhance her physical abilities, she found the enhancements of her Divine Arms were activated even without manifesting the weapon. This meant she couldn't fight under the same conditions as the other participants, so she couldn't be ranked, but if Rio were to rank them with Divine Arms, spirit arts, and enchanted swords allowed, she'd probably rank near the top.

He'd sparred with her multiple times since living in the castle mansion, and she had shown impressive growth in a short time. However...

She really is formidable...

Even then, Satsuki would have a hard time against Aria. That was how superior Aria's abilities were. Not only was every one of her movements clean and efficient, she had a good sense of technique to make her actions hard to predict.

The skirt she's wearing makes it hard to measure the distance. It may be a little unusual to see an attendant fighting in her work uniform, but considering how she was going to use a weapon, it was probably a reasonable combat outfit. Though it's easier to grab at when one is fighting with their fists...

For example, a trained knight would be able to see through their opponents based on their body's movements, but what was most vital was the visual information received from watching the feet, such as the timing of steps and kicks. That's why it was normal to purposefully use the body's

movements as feints or learn techniques to hide them as much as possible, but hiding the feet with a long skirt was another clever method. Rio also used a long coat when he usually fought to make his feet harder to see, but a skirt could cover a greater area.

That being said, Cosette and Natalie were similarly wearing skirts. The reason why Rio found Aria harder to fight than them was simply because she had better skills. She had perfectly mastered techniques to conceal her movements on top of hiding her feet with her skirt, so even though her physical abilities weren't any different from the others, it gave the illusion that her speed was greater. On top of that, she was constantly making the best move with the fastest speed.

However, Rio was keeping up with her movements perfectly, so their match was turning out to be much more advanced than the others. Rio had only moved a few meters while fighting the others, but now he was being forced to move much farther to deal with Aria's attacks. The observers of their match all had their eyes opened wide.

Those who were the most surprised were the ones seeing Aria fight for the first time—in particular, the knights. They looked on, dumbfounded.

"How intense..." Vanessa muttered, watching Aria.

"I've heard rumors that Lady Liselotte's head attendant is skilled, but this is something else," Louise replied.

A short distance away, Cosette overheard their conversation and mumbled, "Sir Haruto is also amazing for being able to keep up with her fierce attacks so perfectly. I wouldn't last more than a few seconds..."

Liselotte's attendants all trained every day, and the one that oversaw them was Aria. Their menu included regularly facing her in a one-on-one match, which the attendants all feared as the training from hell.

"Hey, you guys. Who is she?" Vanessa asked Natalie and Cosette.

"She's our head attendant. Her name's Aria," Cosette answered with a shrug.

"I heard that during her self-introduction... But what kind of history does she have? It seems like she's learned the sword style of the Beltrum Kingdom," Vanessa continued.

Since she also used the Beltrum style of swordsmanship, she had noticed that similarity.

"Hmm... Well, it's not like it's a secret, so I guess it should be fine to say.

She was born to a viscount family of Beltrum."

Aria had mentioned it herself last time she met a knight of the Beltrum Kingdom.

"So she's a viscount's daughter from our kingdom? Why is she serving a duke's daughter in Galarc...?"

Did that mean she was employed as a servant? Anyone born to a viscount family with sword skills like that would normally join the knights—and there was no doubt she'd achieve great success there. It wouldn't be strange for her to be assigned to royalty like Christina or Flora. Vanessa looked like she wanted to recruit her.

"I'm afraid that's a more private question, so please ask Aria herself. She's not that bothered by it, so I doubt she'll refuse to answer, but it's her own matter to discuss."

"Hmm, I see... No, I'm sorry for troubling you." Vanessa sensed the change in the atmosphere and refrained from pressing the issue. However, she still felt regretful that their kingdom had lost such a talented person and bit down on her lip in frustration.

Meanwhile, Rio switched from defense to offense. He pursued the trajectory of Aria's sword, swinging his sword across in the same direction to counterstrike. Aria used the force of her swing to leap to the side, evading Rio's counter by a hair's breadth.

Rio proceeded to pursue her by closing in. Until now, he'd avoided aggressively attacking the other sparring partners, so the observers started buzzing with noise.

"Guh..."

Aria noticed this as well. Since the other participants hadn't been actively attacked, she was surprised enough to widen her eyes faintly. But it still wasn't enough to shake her up—she was able to react to his attacks. With a backstep, she handled his attack, making Rio move forward like he was dancing with his sword.

Rio's attacks were also splendid, making the observers hold their breath. However, they proceeded to meet swords another ten times.

"Let's leave it at that." Rio stopped, calling for an end to the match.

"...Right." Aria replied with a small breath, lowering her sword.

"Now, let's return to everyone else."

"Understood."

Aria followed Rio as he started walking, watching his back.

What an unbelievable boy... His sword skills are perfect and he fights like a veteran master warrior. It's terrifying to think he's only sixteen years old.

She was supposed to be the older one, yet she felt like her sword had more of the passion that could be found in youth. That was the half-exasperated thought that entered Aria's mind.

An opportunity to face opponents like this doesn't come by often. I should enjoy it to my fullest while I can.

She smiled happily. After that, Rio, Aria, and Sara, who had been acting as the umpire, returned to where the knights and the others were.

"I've gained a good idea of everyone's abilities after facing all of you. There are a few things I've noticed, so I'm going to proceed with the lesson while taking those points into consideration. The goal of today is for everyone here to get stronger, so we'll hold mock battles in varying numbers to provide a useful learning experience for everyone. I may end up instructing on the spur of the moment, but please bear with me." Rio explained the direction of the lesson and looked around at everyone. When he bowed his head, the participants all blinked in surprise for a moment.

"Yes, sir!" they all replied energetically.

"Does anyone have any questions?"

"Yes!" Someone's hand shot into the air.

"What is it, Satsuki?"

"Won't you spar with me?"

"I've been sparring with you ever since I came to this mansion, haven't I? That's why I know yours, Sara's, Alma's, and Aishia's abilities already."

"Hmph..." Satsuki pouted. She had been looking forward to it.

"I can spar with you anytime outside of the lesson, so let's fight then."

"Is that a promise?"

"Yes." Although he shrugged, Rio nodded with a smile.

"Yay! I can't wait," Satsuki replied cheerfully.

The knights and attendants watching on sensed how close the two of them were based on that exchange.

"Now, we've got no time to waste. Let's move on to the next menu item."

The lesson continued for another two hours until lunch, and the participants enjoyed a very fulfilling training session.

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Meanwhile, roughly one hour before the special lesson ended, the girls who had been observing the class, which included Miharu, Celia, Latifa, Orphia, Charlotte, Liselotte, Christina, and Flora, entered the mansion ahead of the others; their goal was to prepare lunch and ready the baths that were just completed yesterday for their guests. The mansion was constructed with royalty in mind, so it was built rather spaciously. Of course, there were baths in the mansion to begin with, but Rio decided to remodel them so that Satsuki could still enjoy herself while he was away from the castle.

The residents of the house (including Satsuki, who practically lived there, and Charlotte) had used the baths yesterday, but Christina, Flora, and Liselotte had yet to give them a try. The three of them expressed their interest in bathing, so it was agreed in advance that they would be brought there once they observed enough of the lesson.

Miharu, Orphia, and Latifa were to prepare lunch while Celia, Charlotte, Liselotte, Christina, and Flora would bathe first. They undressed themselves in the changing room with the help of the attendants, then opened the door connecting to the bathroom.

“Oh my goodness...”

“It’s wonderful...”

Flora was the first to react with sparkling eyes, followed by Christina. The two had experienced the bath in the stone house on their return from Paladia to Galarc, so they were filled with more awe than surprise.

However, unlike the stone bath of the other house, this mansion’s bath was made of wood. The walls, floor, and bathtub were all made of wooden materials, creating a room that was overflowing with traditional Japanese taste.

“What a well-made bathtub...”

Liselotte’s eyes were first drawn to the bathtub. Most bathtubs in the Strahl region were of a shallow style that allowed just enough water to wash the body.

However, the new bathtubs Rio and the others had built were deep enough to soak in. On top of that, they were large enough to fit ten people with room to spare. It was filled to the brim with water and covered in a layer of steam. The wall, floor, and bathtub were entirely covered in wooden tiles that gave

the bathroom a bright look. The window opened to a balcony that overlooked the back garden, allowing a half open-air bathing experience.

Unable to forget the feeling of a Japanese bath, Liselotte had also built a bathroom in her mansion back in Amande, but hers could only fit three people at most.

"Sir Haruto and Lady Alma remodeled the existing bathroom together. They recreated the bathrooms that could be found in Lady Satsuki and Lady Miharu's previous world," Charlotte explained, having enjoyed the bath yesterday.

"It's truly wonderful..." Liselotte sighed dreamily. Maybe it was because she recalled her memories as a Japanese person, or perhaps she was plainly impressed by the brilliant bath before her.

Wait, hold on a minute... This mansion was given to him ten days ago, right? They built such a wonderful bath in just ten days? With only the two of them...?

Liselotte snapped back to her senses, tilted her head, and looked around at the bathroom once again, surprised by the degree of perfection. There was no sign of poor construction—everything was cleanly refined past the level of an amateur job. It certainly looked like the work of a carpentry company.

A top-notch swordsman with splendid cooking skills, and he makes his own fine wine as a hobby. He has knowledge of powerful sorcery and can also do carpentry work. Just how many talents do you have, Sir Haruto?

He had so much knowledge, Liselotte's feelings surpassed mere awe and reached into the half-exasperated territory. But as a merchant, that made him all the more attractive to her. Each one of his areas of knowledge was packed with charm—if they were cleverly applied to business, they could lead to a huge fortune.

Thus, the correct thing to do as a profit-seeking merchant was to actively negotiate with him, and she was filled with the impulse to do exactly that, but...

For some reason, I find myself holding back. I don't want to bring up business every time and make him think I only care about making money...

At present, she hadn't been able to actively pursue such discussions. She might have failed as a merchant, but she couldn't help feeling guilty about creating a self-interested relationship like that. Liselotte herself couldn't really explain the reason why, so it was a source of concern for her.

“Is something the matter, Liselotte?”

Just then, Celia tilted her head at Liselotte, wondering why she had stopped at the entrance of the bathroom.

“Ah, no, it’s just such a lovely bathroom... I was wondering if it was difficult to make use of facilities like this. I’m sure water can be produced with magic, but preparing it each time must take some work, and then the water needs to be heated...”

“I shouldn’t be surprised you noticed that—how about I explain how this works?”

“Yes, please do.” Liselotte nodded.

“Then let’s do it while we wash up. Please, come this way. I’ll explain how to use the soap as well.”

With that, Celia led Liselotte over to the washing area. She explained how to use the shampoo, conditioner, and body wash.

“Umm... Celia? Where was this soap supplied from?” Liselotte asked after one sniff of the liquid soap that came out of the bottle. The Ricca Guild also stocked liquid body wash, but she was unfamiliar with the scent from this bottle.

She was also curious about the sorcery that cleansed and heated the water, but she left that topic aside for now. For the moment, her merchant side was far too interested in the soap right now.

“It’s all made by Haruto. He’s really knowledgeable about things like this.”

“Doesn’t he have *too* much knowledge?” In her shock, Liselotte accidentally spilled her inner thoughts from earlier.

“Hee hee, I know how you feel. Perhaps it’s because he’s lived a life without relying on others, but he tends to do everything by himself. I think that’s why he’s learned all kinds of things. He also seems fond of learning things he doesn’t know, and since he has a high level of expectation from himself...” Celia said with a strained smile.

Though that’s also what leads to his low self-esteem, she thought quietly.

“I see. He has the temperament of an artisan,” Liselotte said with a hum.

“Yeah, that’s probably true,” Celia nodded. That evaluation of him made sense.

“Are you talking about Sir Haruto?” Charlotte immediately joined the conversation. Naturally, Christina and Flora were right beside her, and they

had all stopped in the middle of washing themselves to look on curiously.

"Yes. We were talking about how Haruto made this soap and how talented he is," Celia summarized briefly.

"Indeed, Sir Haruto is a truly admirable person," Charlotte agreed strongly.

"That's not quite what I meant..."

"Ah ha ha..."

Celia and Liselotte both had strained smiles on their faces.

"That aside... This is my opinion one night after using Sir Haruto's soap, but the quality is much better than the Ricca Guild's soap," Charlotte said cheerfully, looking at Liselotte.

"My interest has been piqued. Could you explain the difference for my research?" Liselotte asked, expressing her strong interest in the conversation as a merchant. Since Charlotte wasn't the type of person to lie about things like this, she was extremely curious as to how it was better than her guild's products.

"Scent is subjective, so there's little that can be mentioned there. The biggest difference is in the cosmetic effect, I'd say. For example, for the shampoo, the difference is really evident in how smoothly I can comb my fingers through my hair the morning after. It may just suit my hair type in particular, but it feels so nice to touch even after I've slept. The body soap has also had a notable impact on my skin. It moisturizes for a much longer time than the Ricca Guild's soap."

"Those are all points we've been trying to correct in our products. We were still in the testing stage for an improved product, though..."

"Sir Haruto seems willing to explain how to create the soaps stocked here, so why don't you use that knowledge for your store? If you're satisfied with the result after trying it, of course." Charlotte grinned boldly, as though she was confident in the answer. That wouldn't be an issue, though—Liselotte trusted Charlotte's opinion on items.

"That's more than I could hope to ask for, but...is that really okay?"

"Yes, I've received Sir Haruto's agreement last night, so I can mediate the deal. But there are some conditions: a portion of the sales must go to Sir Haruto, Lady Satsuki and I are to receive stock for our own use, and...Princess Christina and Princess Flora are to receive stock priority."

Charlotte certainly worked fast—she hadn't even forgotten to add a favor

for Christina and Flora.

"Understood. Leave it to me." Liselotte nodded smoothly.

"Thank you so much..." It was her first time hearing about the soap being prioritized for her, so Christina blinked in shock before giving her thanks. Her mouth was upturned in a happy smile.

She had enjoyed the soap in the stone house bath during her travels with Rio. It had changed her impression of baths, which she believed to be for cleaning purposes rather than enjoyment until then.

She had yearned to use that soap again after returning to Rodania and taking baths there, but she couldn't say that to Rio out of modesty. To be able to have a safe supply of stock and enjoy this bath once again was most pleasing to her.

"Thank you very much!" Flora echoed in a cheery voice.

"Then it's decided. Also, I've decided to try these soaking-style baths in the main castle. Sir Haruto and Lady Celia will be explaining the technology for that, but can I leave the remodeling to your guild as well?"

"Of course... But when you say 'technology,' do you mean this bathroom uses some kind of unique engineering after all?" Liselotte asked.

"There are magic artifacts to store water and keep it clean, which use unpublished spells that Haruto and I developed. We've decided to officially register the spell in Galarc and the Restoration in the near future, but..." Celia explained. Spell registration worked like patents on modern Earth. Whenever someone released a newly developed spell, they obtained the right to monopolize use of that spell. The kingdom closely managed published spells, ensuring that the developer received a fee every time it was used by someone else.

"They've agreed to teach the spells before doing so. Soaking-style baths can be combined with soaps as negotiation material, so I believe this could be the new trend," Charlotte said, finishing Celia's words. She didn't clarify what kind of negotiation it was being used for but smiled with a meaningful look.

"I see..." Christina said.

"Noblewomen will swarm for it, I'm sure," Liselotte guessed.

At present, the Ricca Guild handled the highest-quality soaps circulating in Galarc and Beltrum. The birth of a much better quality soap would certainly enthrall the customer base of royalty, nobility, and wealthy

merchant women—especially if it had a remarkable effect on beauty. Once they experienced its effects, they would certainly want to continue using it. In which case, there were many ways to take advantage as the developer and supplier. It was the equivalent of obtaining a powerful weapon against the female half of the noble class.

While there haven't been any movements yet, there are definitely people who dislike Sir Haruto's rise in fame. It wouldn't hurt to have as many options as possible.

Liselotte needed to prepare a counterattack in case something happened, increase her allies, and lay the foundations.

This was part of the reason why she requested Rio to give combat training and Celia to hold a lecture this time. Rio wasn't affiliated with any particular faction, but he was clearly under the protection of King Francois and the Second Princess. Thus, the first people who needed to be on his side were the royal knights. This was why she had asked him to give the knights combat training—to give the participants a favorable impression of Rio. That plan had certainly turned out well.

On top of that, the fact that Celia—the famous genius sorcerer of Beltrum—was holding a lecture in Galarc especially out of her friendly relationship with Haruto Amakawa also gave the public a good impression of his connections.

Of course, that wouldn't erase all of the animosity directed Haruto's way.

But that works out anyway, since it just means things will get interesting. I can't wait, Charlotte thought with a pleased smile.

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Once Rio's combat training class ended, the participants were shown inside the mansion to mingle and have some lunch before they all returned to their posts.

However, the group was first led to the baths to wash up after all of the exercising they'd done. There were large baths in the mansion for men and women that were built by dividing the work between Alma and Rio, but the men's bathroom was allocated to half of the group for them to wash up in. In the meantime, Rio used the small bathroom attached to his bedroom to clean himself.

Once that was done, he helped Miharu and the others with preparing lunch. The participants who had been washing up eventually returned to gather in the large dining room.

"Shall we begin soon, then?"

Charlotte took charge of the lunch party that commenced. There were multiple tables placed in the room, and there were no assigned seats to allow the attendees to interact with each other freely.

They could choose whether to stand and move around to talk as they ate, or to sit down and eat instead. The food was lined on the table in the center of the room for people to serve what they wished to eat onto their plates themselves.

"Lady Miharu and Lady Orphia prepared all of the dishes themselves. Sir Haruto prepared some as well, but please eat up before it gets cold—there's no need to show any consideration for others. Enjoy yourselves without being too formal, yes? Now, let us begin." Charlotte clapped her hands and wrapped up her short greeting. The knights seemed a little nervous to be in attendance among princesses.

"Let's take Her Highness up on her offer."

"It's food made by Lady Miharu, Lady Orphia, and Sir Amakawa. It'd be rude to allow it to cool."

The two captains of Galarc's and the Restoration's knights—Louise and Vanessa—led the way to the food. Their subordinates followed behind them.

"It feels a little strange being on the receiving side. And from those directly above me..."

Liselotte's attendant, Natalie, looked a little uncomfortable as she spoke. Part of the reason was probably because she was the most serious out of the attendants, but she was also usually the one serving people, so she wasn't used to this.

"You heard what the princess said: it'd be rude to refuse. Anyways, we've had Sir Haruto and Lady Miharu's homemade cooking before and it was amazing, remember? It'd be a waste not to have some. Come on, let's go."

"Cosette, wait—"

Cosette started dragging Natalie over to the food table by the arm. Watching their backs was Aria, who called out to them with a sigh.

"Make sure not to go over the top, please. Goodness."

Celia giggled and turned to Aria. "Hee hee, you're a guest as well today.

Forget about work and make sure you have lots to eat as well."

"I've received more than enough of a welcome already. I was able to enjoy a splendid bath after the training, and now I'm attending this extravagant lunch. Honestly, it almost makes me wish I could work here," Aria replied with a smile on her face.

Elsewhere in the room, Latifa was tugging Rio by the arm. "Onii-chan, we should get food too!"

"Sorry, I'm going to excuse myself and take a bath. I only washed myself briefly earlier."

"Huh? Oh, should I come and help wash your back, then?" Latifa puffed up her cheeks when she heard Rio was leaving, but immediately smiled playfully to tease him.

"Of course not. I don't want to concern people by being the only man in the room, so please enjoy yourselves without me for a while. The goal of this is for the attendees to interact with each other, after all."

Rio gave a faint sigh of fond exasperation but patted Latifa's head gently. Latifa squeezed her eyes shut at that, her expression softening in happiness.

"I'll be back later."

With those words, Rio quietly left the dining hall without drawing attention to himself. That being said, some people immediately noticed he was gone.

"Oh? Where is Sir Haruto going?" Charlotte, who had been talking to Christina and Liselotte, cocked her head and looked around at the others. This prompted everyone around her to look as well.

"He left to take a proper bath. He said we should enjoy things without him," Latifa answered unhappily.

"Sir Haruto's the owner of this mansion, so he shouldn't have to show such reserve..." Charlotte looked somewhat sullen, pouting slightly.

"But it is a little awkward to be the only man in this room. This mansion's like an all-girls high school right now—though it's normally like this anyway," Satsuki said sympathetically and looked around. There were dozens of people in the dining hall right now, including the waitstaff, and they were all women.

"Still, I didn't expect him to disappear as soon as it began. I believe any gentleman of Sir Haruto's age... No, any young and healthy gentleman would be delighted to remain in this room."

The room was filled with beautiful women in the prime of their youth. Any noble in the prime of their manhood would have been proactively conversing with them.

"No, no. It's *because* he's a gentleman that he left to make us more comfortable."

"That's being too much of a gentleman."

He's probably what they'd call a "herbivore man" back home in Japan, Satsuki thought about Rio. Charlotte apparently found that displeasing and appeared to look sad.

"Hmm... I get what you're trying to say, Char, but I think Rio's lack of arrogance is a good thing."

"I completely agree with that, but...I wish he would see his own charms in a more objective manner. Because everyone wants to talk to him."

"Yeah," Satsuki agreed.

After all, Haruto was the finest gentleman one could wish for. He was good-looking, had a good personality, was strong, high in status, and had a long list of achievements—it'd be hard to find any fault with him. On top of that, he was still sixteen years old and single. Even without the purpose of marriage, anyone would want to approach him. This was Satsuki's line of thinking.

"I'm starting to understand everyone's hardships. I expected more development in our relationship by spending time every day together, yet..." Charlotte sighed uneasily. She visited the mansion nearly every day to make various attempts at seduction, yet Rio was more passive towards romance than she thought. It wasn't as though he was distancing himself from her, and he showed proper awareness of her as the opposite sex when she clung to him, but he never made a move on her.

"I'm glad you understand." Latifa joined the conversation with a smug huff after hearing Charlotte's lamentations. All her years spent with Rio hadn't been for nothing—she understood those hardships too.

Watching that exchange a short distance away was Celia and her old friend Aria, as well as Natalie and Cosette.

"It seems like Sir Haruto left the room," Natalie said, looking over at the conversation between Charlotte and the others she had just overheard.

"Aww, I wanted to use this chance to talk to him more... Whoa, this egg dish is amazing."

“Don’t act disappointed and joyful in the same breath.”

Cosette’s shoulders slumped while she was tasting the food, making Natalie scold her with a fed-up look.

“Haruto will be back soon, I believe,” Celia said with a wry smile.

“Although it seems like there are many others who wish to speak to him, so there won’t be much time to talk to him...” Aria said, looking around the room.

The knights who were digging into the food had also noticed Rio’s absence, and some of them looked rather disappointed. They could be heard discussing how to approach him when he returned.

“If you want to talk to Haruto, do you want me to say something when he returns?” Celia offered thoughtfully.

“Really?” Cosette’s expression brightened as she leaned forward eagerly.

“S-Sure.”

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“Hey now, Cosette. Don’t be rude to Lady Celia. I’m terribly sorry about her, Lady Celia,” Natalie said immediately.

“I’ll also have a strong word with her later,” Aria added, making Cosette stiffen with a groan.

“There’s no need for that. Today is a day for social exchange and there’s no need to be so formal. I’m glad to have the chance to talk to the people Aria normally works with. You’re surrounded by some wonderful colleagues, Aria,” Celia giggled, looking at Aria.

“Yes. It’s all thanks to you.” Aria shrugged as if in exasperation and then nodded, but her expression softened faintly.

“You were classmates with Lady Celia, right?” Natalie asked.

“Yes, that’s right,” Aria replied.

“Aria’s always as strict as a demon from hell, but was she this strong in school too?” Cosette asked Celia next.

“There was no one who could beat Aria in swordsmanship. She was better than all the boys too. She was evenly matched against Haruto as well—you really are incredibly strong, Aria.”

“Sir Haruto was focused on defending until the very end, so I wouldn’t call us evenly matched...”

“Really? To be honest, I don’t know much about swords...”

“I was attacking rather seriously, but he parried everything easily. I’m not sure I would have a chance of winning if we fought until the end... At the very least, I wasn’t able to see all of Sir Haruto’s abilities in that match.” Aria looked back on her fight with Rio in contemplation.

“Has Sir Haruto ever struggled with a fight until now?” Cosette asked Celia.

“Hmm, I wonder. It’s hard to measure his true strength, so I can’t imagine him losing... He’s just as strong as Aishia, I think,” Celia answered, looking over at where Aishia was seated with Miharu and Liselotte.

“That’s true. I fought her briefly during the latter half of the lesson, but she was very strong. Lady Sara and Lady Alma too...” Natalie said.

The latter half of the lesson had been a mock battle focused on Rio’s teachings, so Aishia, Sara, and Alma had assisted in conducting the matches, but Aishia had gone undefeated. Only Aria was able to fight until a tie was called. (Sara and Alma lost to Aria, but they won against every other participant.)

“Her strength was one thing, but isn’t Aishia’s cuteness unmatched? When I saw her face close up, I was shocked at how refined it was... Her skin’s so white as well. I lost so quickly while I was staring out of envy.” Cosette let out a dreamy sigh in reverence.

“At least fight properly...” Natalie muttered tiredly under her breath.

“Ah ha ha... Her appearance can even captivate people of the same sex. I’ve gotten used to it while living with her, but sometimes I’m reminded of her beauty and lose confidence in myself,” Celia said listlessly.

“Umm, your beauty is enough to make other women jealous as well, no?” Natalie protested to Celia.

“Indeed. If you’re the same age as Aria, that makes you the same age as us—yet you still look like you’re in your teens. You’re like a fairy, a sweet young girl,” Cosette added.

“I’m often told I have a baby face...” Celia hung her head in disappointment.

“What’s wrong with that? Maintaining your youth and beauty is your ultimate duty as a lady, no? Your appearance is a powerful weapon anyone would envy, Lady Celia. And I believe your senses have been numbed by all the beautiful girls around Sir Haruto, because you’re definitely included as one of them.”

“Th-Thank you very much...” Celia said hesitantly, pressured by Cosette.

“It looks like you’re all having fun.”

Just then, Vanessa came up to them. Beside her was the captain of Charlotte’s guards, Louise.

“Good day to you, Vanessa. I watched a part of your training earlier—I’m glad to see you’re better and back on your feet,” Celia, the one most familiar with Vanessa, said.

“Yes, I’m in my best condition thanks to Sir Amakawa. But that aside... Are the two of you acquainted with each other?” Vanessa looked between Celia and Aria.

“...Yes, we were classmates back at the Royal Academy.” Celia glanced at Aria to check she was allowed to reply before giving her answer.

“I see... That means your grade was a particularly impressive one, since you have a magic genius and a sword genius in the same year.”

“Celia has achieved great success as a sorcerer, but you’re overevaluating me. I dropped out of the academy without ever graduating.”

“No, it’s vexing, but there’s no doubt you were the most skilled out of all the participants today. Our kingdom suffered an immeasurable loss by letting you go so easily. The only consolation is that you went to our alliance kingdom, Galarc...”

“It’s an honor to be told that, but it’s not that big of a deal.” Aria shook her head respectfully.

“The same applies for Sir Amakawa, but it seems true geniuses are humble about themselves. The attendants of Duke Cretia’s daughter are all talented, but the head attendant is on another level—one of the leading swordmasters in the kingdom, for sure. That’s the word in the castle, and I consider the rumors to be true,” Louise said, joining in on the conversation by praising Aria.

“It’s an honor...”

“I’d love to invite someone as skilled as you into the royal guards, but...”

“I’m sorry, I have no intention of serving anyone other than Lady Liselotte.”

“What wonderful loyalty.”

“Aria is both an attendant and a knight...”

Louise gave an approving smile at Aria’s immediate reply, while Vanessa complimented her in admiration, though she seemed a little conflicted about it.

“At any rate, I’m sure we’ll be seeing more of each other at the training sessions. Let’s get along well. As leaders of our own groups, it’d be nice to be close to each other.”

“Of course, it’d be my pleasure.” Aria accepted the hand Vanessa offered to shake.

“Sir Amakawa said he wasn’t confident in his abilities as an instructor, but it’s a rare opportunity to receive coaching from someone of his strength. The participants are all skilled as well. It’ll be a wonderful training experience. Let’s all strengthen our abilities together.”

“Indeed. We should be grateful to Her Highness for providing the opportunity, and to Sir Amakawa for agreeing to teach us.” Louise also shook hands with Aria.

“We were even treated to a wonderful bath experience and a delicious meal afterwards. I would have liked to thank Sir Amakawa for it, but...”

“Unfortunately, it seems like he’s left the room for the moment. I’m sure

he'll show up again later, so please tell him then," Celia said to Vanessa, who was looking around in search of Rio.

"Right. My subordinates also wanted to speak to him. They'll be disappointed," Vanessa said with a wry smile.

"Mine too." Louise echoed her sentiment with a sigh.

"Was there something they wished to discuss?" Celia asked, tilting her head.

"Our work doesn't provide much opportunity to meet new people. To be honest, everyone's starved," Vanessa explained.

Women were normally used as guards for female royalty, but the constant changing of guards was looked down upon, which made the job rather difficult to quit. Many noblemen disliked how their resignation was restricted, so female knights were known for missing their prime marriage age, which only further spurred the lack of female knights for protecting female royalty.

"The situation is the same in every kingdom, it seems."

"It's similar for attendants as well."

Louise and Aria spoke with self-deprecating smiles. Beside them, Cosette and Natalie nodded firmly in agreement.

"Ah ha ha..." Celia laughed awkwardly in understanding.

Chapter 2: Preparing for Departure

Shortly before Rio began living in the Galarc Castle mansion...

At the farthest border of the Strahl region, a small nation was born. To any other kingdom, the existence of this nation would be seen as heresy.

It was called the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica. There was, of course, a reason why the Erica Nation (as it was called by its people) was seen as heresy: it was missing the one feature that every other nation in the Strahl region had in common, which was the presence of a king or emperor; an absolute ruler. There was no privileged class like nobility either.

This nation existed for the sake of its people. The nation didn't function for its ruler or nobility, but for the sake of the citizens living there. People were born free and equal. That was the ideology behind the citizens who overthrew the royal rule.

Because of this, the citizens of this nation faced no social discrimination. There were no royals and nobles to discriminate against the citizens. The country moved by the hands of the people, for the sake of the people. In order to adhere to that way of life, the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica held an election to form a congress of representatives, creating a democracy where political decisions were made indirectly.

However, there needed to be something that could act as a symbol representing the nation. After its formation, Saint Erica was chosen by the first elected congress as the first head of state for leading the people in the founding moment of the nation. The nation itself was also named out of reverence for Saint Erica.

In the capital of Ericaburg, where the former royal capital once stood, the land was completely destroyed, as the liberators led by Saint Erica had invaded the capital to rally a revolution. The castle that protected the former king was now nothing but rubble, and the buildings in parts of the capital had been destroyed by the revolutionary army along the way.

However, despite this, the population living in the capital of Ericaburg was in high spirits. And it was all thanks to the absence of the royalty and

nobility that had suppressed them with heavy taxes for so long.

Saint Erica had explained it was necessary to collect taxes for the nation, but she also declared that all the taxes would be used for the sake of the people. To back up that declaration, she took the fortune the royalty and nobility had hoarded and freely gave it out to the people in support of restoring the city.

Furthermore, because Erica was a beautiful woman in her mid-twenties, she was extremely popular amongst the people. The citizens worshipped her and worked diligently to restore the city.

Currently, Saint Erica herself was currently seated in the office of the building being used as the temporary official residence.

“Lady Erica, would you please reconsider things once more?”

Before her was a man pleading at her with a frown. His name was Andrei; he was a young man in his twenties, with a face that was serious and intelligent.

“No, Andrei. I’ve already decided.” Erica’s black hair fluttered as she shook her head slowly, a grin on her face.

“We will be extremely troubled if our head of state leaves so soon after the foundation of the country. You suddenly said you wanted to leave on a journey...” Andrei looked at Erica with an imploring gaze.

“This nation is my home, of course, and I still consider the people of this nation subjects of salvation. However, there are people in other countries being oppressed and stripped of their human rights. I have a duty to save those people just as much. There’s only one of me, so I’m afraid I have to act in order of precedence...” Erica said, sighing sadly.

“Lady Erica...” Andrei looked at Erica worriedly, but he also seemed greatly impressed, as his eyes were filled with reverence.

“Say, Andrei. The fact you’re worried is just proof of how much you’re relying on me, right? I’m very happy you think of me so highly.” Erica smiled at him gently.

“M-My Lady! I am undeserving of such words!” Andrei blushed faintly, shaking his head in a fluster.

“You’ve cooperated with me ever since I began my attempt to found this nation. I value you quite a bit. You’re an extremely dependable person. I’m able to leave on my journey because I know you’ll be here in this country. If it weren’t for you, I’d feel too uneasy about leaving.”

“Th-That’s... I am undeserving.”

“That’s not true. That’s why the congress and I appointed you as prime minister, in order to assist the head of state. In my absence, the prime minister will be the acting head.”

Andrei was originally the owner of a trading company, but was deeply impressed by Erica’s teachings of equality and provided support from the start of the revolution. Now that they had formed a new nation, he assumed the position of prime minister of the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica, the second in command to Erica.

“I cannot act as your replacement, Lady Erica...”

“Andrei, leading others is surprisingly easy,” Erica said gracefully to the doubtful man.

“That cannot be. Who could lead the people other than you? You, who thinks of the people above everything else...”

“I merely think of the people equally.”

“That’s exactly why. That’s what makes you a saint. You should be the one to guide the way. Everyone believed that when they chose you as leader.”

“While I do wish to respond to those feelings of yours, I...”

“...Your own feelings won’t change. I understand. Then please use the griffins to go on your trip. And take some people for protection.” Andrei hung his head in resignation.

“I’m sorry, Andrei.”

“Please don’t apologize.”

“I shall bring back a souvenir from my journey for you as an apology... That’s right, was it the Ricca Guild that you mentioned when we first met? A product of theirs might be nice. You said you wanted to stock some of their products in your shop, right?”

“You remember something like that...?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you very much... But I’ve already retired from being a merchant.” Andrei thanked her happily, but at the same time looked a bit saddened.

“But it was your dream, no? To make a deal with a world-famous merchant guild.”

“Well, yes...”

“Besides, deals aren’t limited to merchants. It’s possible for the country to make a trade deal as well.”

“Indeed, I can’t believe I missed such a thing.”

“And if the merchant guild is famous to that degree, it’d be most desirable to have them support our nation. I may try to meet their representative on my journey.”

“It’d be extremely reassuring to have them side with your teachings... But I’ve heard the president of the Ricca Guild is a noble daughter from a prominent Galarc family.”

“I don’t plan on making an enemy of every noble and kingdom. We are pacifists, after all. Let’s pray that the noble daughter representing the Ricca Guild agrees with our ideals,” Erica said to Andrei with the benevolent smile of a saint.

These were the events that happened several days before Erica left the country.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, some time had passed since Rio started living in the Galarc Castle. Hiroaki often hung out with Rei and Kouta these days. Along with Roanna, the four of them gathered in Hiroaki’s room.

Recently, Hiroaki got into writing new stories. He took elements from fictional novels that thrived in Japan and tried to create a hit piece targeted to this world. Rei gave his thoughts from the view of a novel enthusiast, Roanna gave her advice as a noble of this world, and Kouta gave his opinion here and there. The plot Hiroaki wrote in Japanese was translated into the language of this world and entrusted to Roanna to be shared.

“This plot is the best, Hiroaki,” Rei said with excitement, having finished reading the newest story they had carefully refined.

“Right? I’m satisfied with this one.”

“Having two heroines was the correct choice. The face of this series is the unaging girl Cecillie, but Misally who opposes her is super cute as well. Any normal human would feel uneasy about aging, but the heroine’s charms are drawn out well. I can get behind this.”

“It’s the contrast between an unaging little girl and a regular little girl—that’s the main theme of this work. A regular little girl or an unaging girl, which is more attractive? That’s the question for the readers. If Misally’s charm as a heroine seems magnified by being the underdog, then that’s

exactly what I planned," Hiroaki said, self-satisfied, his nose held high with confidence.

"But if it isn't written well, Cecillie will be swallowed up by Misally, yeah?"

"That's where my skills come into play. I'm counting on your editing skills as well."

"Leave it to me. I can't wait to read the first draft. The plot is completed with this, right?"

Hiroaki waved a hand to calm Rei's impatience. "Now, let's not get ahead of ourselves. It wouldn't be a problem to call this completed, but I have to get Kouta's and Roanna's opinions first. What do you two think?" In order to seek the thoughts of the two who had worked together with him until now, he looked at Kouta and Roanna with a pleased expression.

"I think it's very interesting. However, I have a question rather than an opinion—do immortality elixirs exist in this world, Roanna?" Kouta asked.

"I don't know if they exist, but research to create such elixirs has been conducted numerous times."

"I see. So the people in this world are interested in such things too. By the way, is there a reason why the main character's name is Koumei? I believe it's the name of a famous tactician that appears in the Three Kingdoms, but..."

"Of course, it's because I like Koumei," Hiroaki answered immediately.

"I-I see..."

"What? You have a problem with that, Kouta?" Rei asked.

"No, it's just that the name doesn't exist in this world, so I was wondering what they would think of that... Since you're translating the story into this world's language, it'd be weird to write the name in Japanese." Kouta raised a rather logical point.

"Yeah, I suppose a Japanese name would be odd, since it'd never be explained. But the main character's name will be Koumei. I insist on using Koumei as the main character's name in all my works. Anyway, the main character is a hero summoned from another world. It'd be weird for him to have a local name."

"I see. That's true... You have a point," Kouta hummed, impressed.

"I know." Hiroaki nodded smugly.

"Then the plot is complete like this. All that's left is to write the

manuscript, Hiroaki," Rei said excitedly.

"Yeah. If I was being greedy, I would've liked to have a cute illustration of the heroines as character material. It'd help solidify my image of the heroines too. Having illustrations would also make it seem more like a light novel when it goes on sale, and it'd be an easy form of appeal to the readers."

"Oh, don't worry about that. Kouta can draw the illustrations," Rei said.

"What?! Really?!" Hiroaki raised his voice in interest. Roanna's eyes also widened.

"His mom was an art teacher. He's been learning to draw since he was a kid, and he can draw whatever you want. He can draw cute girls too."

"Hey now, if you had that kind of talent, you should have said so earlier." Hiroaki grinned in delight.

"It isn't that impressive," Kouta replied weakly.

"Say, Kouta. You remember that cute illustration I asked you to draw for me before we came to this world? Draw that again."

"All right, fine... It's hard to draw with this pen and paper, so don't expect it to be the same quality." At Rei's request, Kouta took the quill pen and paper in hand. With extremely practiced movements, he swiftly moved the pen across the paper.

Everyone watched Kouta's work curiously.

"Wow, how are you so fast at drawing?" Hiroaki asked in wonder.

"It's because I've made a copy of the original once before. There's no need for me to think of the pose and composition again, and my hand remembers the lines. Though the tools make it harder to draw," Kouta replied while moving his hand.

"Is that how it works...?" Hiroaki looked doubtful. *Does this guy actually have a lot of artistic talent?* he wondered to himself.

Several minutes later, Kouta's hand stopped. "It's a rough sketch, but it's done."

"Seriously? It's Hiyori! And the quality is amazing, man." Hiroaki's eyes sparkled as he looked down at the completed illustration. It was an anime character that he knew well.

"As expected of a man of culture, Hiroaki."

"I was a fan of her voice actor. She has such a nice voice."

"Whoa, really? I completely agree. I have all her albums and concert Blu-rays, and I've joined her official fan club."

“What? You should have said that earlier! I’m in the fan club too.”

“Well, we’ve only been talking about the plot lately.”

“That’s true...” Hiroaki looked down at the illustration again. “Hiyori’s so nice...” he murmured.

“She is indeed,” Rei echoed enthusiastically.

“What are the two of them talking about?” Roanna asked.

“I’m not sure myself, and I don’t think we need to know...” Kouta said.

“It’s decided. The illustrator for my work will be you, Kouta,” Hiroaki said, pointing at him.

“I don’t mind drawing the illustrations, but how long will it take to produce a novel?”

“It’ll have to be handwritten, so I won’t know until I’ve written it, but one volume’s worth of text should take at least one month to write.”

“What do you need for the illustrations?”

“The character designs for the main character and heroines, and some inserts for a selection of scenes would be nice.”

“In that case, the illustrations might take the same amount of time. Even if I worked alongside you, the fastest I could get a volume done would be one and a half to two months.”

“Yeah, that sounds fair. Come to think of it, what kind of plans did you guys have for the future?” Hiroaki asked, suddenly curious.

“Technically, we’re here on a temporary trip...”

“Who knows? I believe we’re returning when Princess Christina and Duke Huguenot leave the country, but...”

Kouta and Rei exchanged a look.

“I believe that is the correct assumption to have for now,” Roanna confirmed, having been in touch with Christina.

“I see... What kind of positions do you guys have in the Restoration, anyway?”

“I’m a baronet, and Kouta’s considered a guest. We’re attending the academy in Rodania out of Princess Christina’s kindness, learning about how to live in this world from now on.”

“Hmm, so you’re both students. But why did Rei get a baronet title while Kouta didn’t get one? Though it’s a bit late to be asking that...” Hiroaki looked at Kouta.

“Unlike Rei, I’m only staying in the Restoration temporarily.”

“Temporarily? You’re not joining?”

“I don’t intend to, no. Princess Christina did say I could do the same as Rei and receive a title if I joined, but...”

“Was there something else you wanted to do?”

“I actually wanted to try traveling as an adventurer,” Kouta answered shyly, scratching at his cheek.

“An adventurer? Whatever for?”

“I mean... I guess it’s because I want to grow up and become a real man...”

“Become a real man? Aha... I see. You’re a virgin, aren’t you? And you were made fun of for it, right?” Hiroaki sounded puzzled for a moment, but he immediately sensed something and pointed it out to Kouta.

“Wh-Why?! H-H-H-How did you...?!” Kouta’s voice cracked in a panic. Beside him, Roanna blushed awkwardly, while Rei burst out laughing.

“Heh. Boys of our age only say, ‘I want to grow up! Hmph!’ when their ideals have been twisted by being a virgin. You were rejected by the girl you liked, weren’t you?” Hiroaki guessed, grinning.

“Wow, bull’s-eye. As expected of Hiroaki.”

“I knew it.”

Rei and Hiroaki were highly amused.

“Wh-What’s wrong with that?!” Kouta snapped back, blushing.

“Ah, there’s nothing wrong with it. Wanting to go on a journey because you were rejected by a woman is good character development. I like those kinds of unpopular guys.”

“Guh... I-I’m sure it’s easy for you to say that when you have Roanna.”

“Y-You fool! H-High-ranked noblewomen like Roanna don’t engage in premarital relations!”

“Huh? R-Really?”

Kouta looked shocked. He looked between Hiroaki and Roanna nervously. “Th-Then that means...”

“...” Roanna flushed, but remained silent.

“B-Bastard, that’s sexual harassment! Don’t say such things in front of Roanna!”

Hiroaki showed a surprisingly innocent reaction. It seemed like he didn’t want Roanna to hear what they were talking about.

“W-Well, it’s your fault you started talking about virgins. Talking about

virginity in front of a girl is sexual harassment in itself!" Kouta rebutted.

"It's your fault for being a virgin!" Hiroaki declared.

"Indeed, Kouta's a little sensitive about being a virgin," Rei said, taking Hiroaki's side.

"Ngh..." Kouta was unable to argue back after that.

"Tch... Hey, Kouta. Instead of journeying as an adventurer, get a girlfriend and graduate from being a virgin first," Hiroaki advised, sighing tiredly.

"Wh-Why do I have to do that?"

"Because you're a virgin."

"S-Stop saying the word 'virgin' so many times... At least give me a reason." Kouta frowned, sulking slightly.

"Let me say this bluntly: you're still in love with that girl, aren't you?"

"Wha..."

Having had his mark hit once again, Kouta blushed bright red. There was no need to confirm it with words.

"Your face is asking why I know, huh? The reason why you want to grow up is because you're still attached to that girl who rejected you. You want to show her how you've grown," Hiroaki continued, speaking the truth.

"Guh... Why do you sound so confident in your words? Hiroaki, you almost sound like..."

Like you're a virgin as well—Kouta thought, looking at Hiroaki as he swallowed those words.

"Dumbass. Whatever. At any rate, you and Rei are my assistants now." Hiroaki chuckled with a strangely calm smile.

"You just can't decide that out of the blue..." Kouta said reluctantly.

"That's fine, right, Rei?"

"Yeah, I don't mind," Rei agreed easily.

"Then it's decided. The two of you are my assistants from today."

"No, wait a minute."

"What's the problem? You'll be working on the novel for the time being anyway. You can leave for your journey afterwards. Until you do, you can be my assistant. For now, be my exclusive illustrator," Hiroaki decided rather forcefully. "Hey, Roanna. Prepare a position for these two. They're becoming my assistants. At least raise Rei's social rank," he added before Kouta could protest.

"...I understand." Roanna hesitated out of consideration for Kouta, but reluctantly nodded her head.

"Say, Rei. Are there any nice women this guy could be matched with?"

"Hmm... There's this one girl called Mikaela Belmond. She's on good terms with my fiancée and we often sit together during lectures."

"Huh. Do you know her, Roanna?"

"I've never met her personally, but I believe she's the daughter of Baron Belmond."

"I see. A baron's daughter, huh? Did those two come to this castle with you?" Hiroaki asked Rei.

"No, they're both in Rodania."

"Okay. Call her here with your fiancée."

"Huh? Is it really that easy to call her here?"

Enchanted airships were a transport option, but they were normally used by high-ranked nobles and military alone. It wasn't easy for a baron's daughter to use them to travel. Moving an airship also required the permission of a noble or royal with a fairly high rank.

"It'll just be a few hours by airship, right? By becoming my assistants, you're becoming my subordinates. As your superior, I want to meet who you're marrying. Please make those arrangements as well, Roanna."

"As you wish."

It was a different matter when the hero was giving the orders. Roanna didn't show any particular objections either as she nodded.

"Thanks," Hiroaki said in satisfaction. "Now. Let's hear more about how you were rejected, eh?"

The conversation moved on to the story of how Kouta had his heart broken.

◇ ◇ ◇

One night, half a month after Rio began teaching his combat classes, Rio, Miharu, Celia, Latifa, Aishia, Sara, Orphia, Alma, and a visiting Satsuki gathered in the dining hall of the mansion. They had all finished eating and were enjoying post-dinner tea.

Rio looked around at everyone and started speaking somewhat formally. "I have something serious I'd like to discuss today, if that's all right. It

mostly concerns Satsuki, Sara's group, and Celia and Miharu."

Everyone exchanged puzzled glances with each other.

"Sure... What is it?" Satsuki asked on behalf of the group.

"I wanted to have a proper discussion about the future."

"The future...?"

"What I want to do might not be aligned with what you all want to do, so I want to hear everyone's thoughts. There's also some information I wanted to pass on," Rio explained, casually glancing over at Sara and Latifa.

"I see. How considerate—though typical of you, I suppose." Satsuki chuckled, finding the way Rio didn't decide things for everyone without asking first to be a positive aspect of his personality.

"First, I believe I've mentioned this before, but I'm thinking of leaving in another three or four weeks. It'll be another two months or so before I return again," Rio said, revealing the first order of business.

"Can I ask where you'll be going...?" Satsuki asked slowly, watching Rio's expression.

"Of course. The first stop will be the village where Sara and the others are from. After that, I'll be heading to my parents' hometown."

"Their hometown? That's in..."

"The Yagumo region."

"Right. Isn't that really far? It's past the vast wasteland east of the Strahl region. I heard it's really dangerous..." Satsuki looked at Rio as though to question how he'd get there.

"Traveling by foot would take years, but it can be reached in less than a month through the air. However, even then, it's a dangerous trip..."

With no map or compass, there was no choice but to travel while relying on the position of the sun, limiting movement to the daylight hours. There were dangerous creatures in the sky and on the ground, and abnormal weather sometimes prevented one from flying altogether.

"Huh... So if you went by air, it'd take two months just to get there and back."

"Well, yes," Rio said. Using a teleportation crystal to the spirit folk village would shorten the return trip, but explaining that now would derail the conversation.

"But what are you going to the Yagumo region for when it's such a long trip?"

“I want to give my relatives an update on what’s been going on.”

“Huh? You have family in the Yagumo region?” Satsuki’s eyes were wide. She thought Rio had been born and raised in the Strahl region, where he’d lost his parents at a young age and become an orphan. It didn’t feel right to ask about his past, so she hadn’t known he had actually been to Yagumo before.

“I haven’t mentioned it to you before, but yes.”

“Wow, so you’ve met them before?”

“Yes.”

“Huh. I kind of want to meet them. What are they like?” Satsuki asked. Miharu and Celia also fixed their stares on Rio.

“They’re my paternal grandmother and cousin. And my maternal grandparents too.”

“I see, I see. Is your cousin a boy? Or a girl?”

“She’s a girl who’s one year older than me...”

“Which makes her the same age as me, huh? Aww, now I *really* want to meet them!”

“The main issue is this: Sara’s group will return to their village to give their updates to their families as well, but what will the rest of you do? If you come along, you won’t be returning to the Strahl region for two months. Visiting my relatives is purely my own personal matter, so you can stay in this mansion if you wish...”

There was also the option to wait at the spirit folk village instead.

“Yes! I want to go with you! Your family is my family too. I need to greet them properly,” Latifa immediately replied, raising her hand.

“I’m also staying with Haruto,” Aishia added.

“It’ll depend on whether the elders give permission, but we’re also thinking of going with you to Yagumo after visiting the village.” Sara sent Orphia and Alma a signal with her eyes before quietly expressing their intentions.

“Yes! I want to go too!” Satsuki also raised her hand energetically.

“You can’t leave the castle, Satsuki.”

There was no way she could casually leave the castle to go all the way to Yagumo.

“Yeah, but...” Satsuki puffed up her cheeks in a cute protest.

“What about Miharu and Celia?”

“Umm, I...” Miharu looked at Satsuki hesitantly. Perhaps she felt guilty Satsuki was being left behind all alone.

“It’s fine, Miharu. You can leave me. I’m just sulking because I know I can’t go,” Satsuki persuaded Miharu with a wry smile.

“Yes. But there’s also the matter of Aki and the others...”

“Oh, right. It’s true some time has passed since we all split up, so it makes sense that you’d be wondering what they’re up to. And now you’ll be gone for at least two months.”

They had decided to wait patiently for time to pass, but several months had gone by since they split. It made sense to feel curious about how they were doing.

In fact, Miharu hung her head with a hesitant expression.

After weighing all her options in her heart, she finally decided on prioritizing her own feelings and raised her head. She then turned to Satsuki near pleadingly.

“Is it... Is it okay if I go along too?”

“Of course. Leave things to me in your absence.” Satsuki was pleased Miharu had prioritized herself for once—and perhaps a little pleased to be relied on—as she thumped herself in the chest and accepted the request.

“I’ll send a letter to Masato and ask if there’s been any progress. There should be a reply by the time you return, so look forward to it.”

“Thank you so much, Satsuki.”

Satsuki shook her head shyly at the way Miharu bowed deeply at her. “It’s fine—nothing to thank me for. What are friends for?”

“I’m counting on you too, Satsuki.” When Rio bowed at her, Satsuki made an even more embarrassed face.

“Sure thing.”

“That leaves Celia. What will you do? There’s the Restoration to consider, as well as the main Beltrum Kingdom’s problems. You can stay in this mansion if you wish, but...”

She must be worried about how her family is doing back home, Rio thought as he looked at Celia.

Celia paused for a brief moment, but answered with a bright smile. “No... I’m your assistant right now. I’m going too, of course.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’ve received some information about the main government, and my

family doesn't seem to be in any immediate danger. There's nothing in my power I can do to help the Restoration's relationship with Beltrum. Only Princess Christina can be entrusted with that. Besides, she left you to me..." Celia trailed off, staring at Rio.

Rio tilted his head, puzzled. "...Is there something else?"

"Yeah. Well, I want to meet your relatives too..." Celia said a little shyly.

"I understand. Then I'll take you to the Yagumo region as well."

"Okay." Celia nodded happily.

"The first one to meet them will be me, your little sister!" Latifa puffed up her cheeks.

"I know," Rio agreed with a strained smile.

"That means it'd be better for us to return to the village first. I'd love to show Celia the village, and the elders need to give their permission for that," Sara suddenly suggested, exchanging looks with Orphia and Alma.

"You mean the three of you will go back first?" Rio asked after a pause.

"Yes. I don't believe there'll be a problem if she shows up at your referral, but it's probably better to give advance warning."

"So you'll be returning here after you've received confirmation...?"

"Yes, exactly."

In other words, the three of them would be traveling through the Wilderness alone. It wasn't likely that anything bad would occur, but there were creatures there that even Sara and the others would struggle against.

"I can go," Rio offered.

"You're the owner of this mansion, so you should stay here. And please trust in our abilities a little more. It's nice that you care about us, and I know we're no match for you or Aishia, but we're still strong enough to face the Wilderness," Sara said, looking at Rio with scornful eyes.

"..."

"You guys..." Celia began to speak but was interrupted.

"Oh, don't apologize or thank us, please."

"Yes, we're not doing this just for Rio's or Celia's sake."

"It's simply something we wanted to do."

Orphia, Alma, and Sara all made comments in anticipation of what Rio and Celia were about to say.

"I understand... In that case, please use the teleport crystal in my possession on your way there. That should reduce the duration and risk of

your trip by half," Rio said.

Sara nodded with satisfaction. "All right. We'll take you up on that offer."

"Teleport crystal... That's the name of the artifact that was used when Princess Christina and Princess Flora were abducted, right?" Satsuki asked, blinking.

"Yes. I possess one as well." Rio gave the explanation on teleport crystals he'd omitted earlier. Satsuki could be trusted, so there was no need to keep it a secret.

"Huh? Wow! So you can warp if you have that?" Satsuki asked in great interest.

"Yes, but not freely. The destination is limited to Sara's village, and the trip can only be made one way."

"That's still amazing, though."

"Indeed. That's why I'd appreciate it if you kept this a secret from anyone else. This is a particularly valuable item made from sorcery that's considered lost in the Strahl region. If it's stolen, Sara's village will also be at risk of invasion."

"Right, got it." Satsuki nodded with a serious look.

Rio continued with a glance at the spirit folk girls. "Also, I wanted to use this opportunity to talk about Sara and the others."

"Are you sure? They're from a secret village, so you can't speak too much about it, right? And with artifacts like this, I can imagine why..." Satsuki also looked over to check their expressions. The only thing she knew was that they lived in a hidden village at the outskirts of Strahl.

"This is at the request of the people involved."

Sara and the others had gone to Rio, asking him to explain things properly to Satsuki before they departed. They also considered telling Charlotte, but ultimately decided not to this time because of her position as royalty. That being said, their trust in Charlotte was indeed high enough for her to be considered at all.

"We want to get closer to Satsuki, so we discussed things amongst ourselves and decided not to keep secrets. We knew you were always acting considerate towards us," Sara said.

"It felt like there was a distance between us—like we were making a wall. And we didn't want that," added Orphia.

"That's why we'd appreciate it if you hear us out," Alma disclosed.

“Thank you...” Satsuki said shyly. “But it’s a rule of your village, isn’t it? You don’t have to break it for me.”

“Yes. But there are exceptions to the rules,” Sara answered a little bashfully. Thus, Satsuki found out the truth behind the spirit folk girls and their village. The girls departed for the village two days later.

Chapter 3: Reunion at the Village

Roughly three weeks later, Sara and the others returned to Strahl from the spirit folk village. Sara's contract spirit, Hel, snuck into the mansion in spirit form and informed everyone of their return. Rio slipped out of the mansion that night to make his way to the stone house where Sara and the others were staying at the outskirts of the capital.

"Sorry for dropping by so late," Rio said.

"Not at all. Please, come in," said Sara, and Rio entered.

Invited by Sara, Rio went through the front door.

"Long time no see, Rio."

"Good evening."

Orphia and Alma were also there to greet him.

"I'm glad to see the three of you are well. Has anything new happened?"

"Yes. We've gotten permission to bring Celia to the village. The teleport crystal has been recharged with magic essence, so it's ready to go whenever."

"I understand. We'll probably leave within the next few days, then."

"Okay. But there was something else... I'm not sure whether it can be classified as a problem, but there are people who want to meet you once we return to the village," Sara said to Rio in a rather hesitant tone.

"Meet me? I don't mind... But may I ask who it is?" Rio cocked his head in question.

"About that... We were asked not to say anything so that the explanation can be given directly. Could you wait until we return to the village to hear the details?" Sara scratched her cheek, unsure of how to explain things.

"All right. That's fine too." He couldn't really understand the situation, but if Sara was the one saying this, then there must be a reason. Rio wasn't the type of person to pry. He nodded easily and decided to wait until they reached the village.

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Several days later, it was time for Rio and the others to depart for the spirit folk village. Standing at the front door of Rio's estate were Satsuki and Charlotte, who had come to see them off. Francois had given his farewells in advance, while Rio and Celia had visited Christina and Flora to inform them of their absence. Liselotte had also said her goodbyes, so none of them were present to see them off right now.

"I can't believe you'll be gone for another two months... I'll be lonely." Charlotte puffed up her cheeks in a sulking manner, looking up at Rio from a close distance. Any growing boy unaccustomed to girls would've been blown away on the spot.

"I plan on staying in the mansion for a while next time I return." Rio averted his eyes awkwardly. Latifa's eyes glinted beside him.

"Princess Charlotte, that's a little too close."

"We're about to be separated, so I'm being close on purpose." Charlotte moved forward even more, closing the gap between her and Rio until there was nothing left. She leaned her upper body against Rio's chest.

"Onii-chan!" Latifa's voice was nearly a scream. The only reason why she didn't tear Charlotte away at a moment's notice was because she was aware the other person involved was, indeed, a princess. Miharu and Celia were similarly aware of this, but their personalities prevented them from doing anything but watch on nervously.

"Princess Charlotte, your jesting has gone a little too far." Rio placed his hands on Charlotte's shoulders and slowly tried to place distance between them. However—

"I'm not joking, though..."

Charlotte immediately took Rio's right hand in a graceful movement and quietly brought it to her cheek. She then proceeded to touch his fingers with her lips.

"Oops, I've kissed you." There was a faint blush on her cheeks. She added some comments about how it was her first time and how she wouldn't do such a thing as a joke.

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“Th-That doesn’t count! It doesn’t count as a kiss! That was on the fingers. The fingers!” Latifa immediately protested.

“Then I wish to kiss him on the lips next.” Charlotte’s heated gaze was fixed on Rio’s mouth.

“Onii-chan!” Latifa tugged on Rio’s arm, trying to pull him away from Charlotte.

“Hey now, you know you can’t do that, Char. You’re an unmarried princess. We’ll pretend we didn’t see that just now, but you need to leave it at that. Okay?” Satsuki had been watching the series of events in shock, but Latifa’s yell shocked her back into her senses, allowing her to warn Charlotte with a sigh.

“You should listen to Satsuki.” Thanks to Satsuki’s intervention, Rio was able to distance himself from Charlotte this time. In exchange, Latifa clung to him instead.

I’m so tired, and we haven’t even left yet.

They had yet to depart, but Rio felt as exhausted as the end of the journey.

“Get in the horse carriage before Char does anything else strange, Haruto.” Satsuki urged him towards the nearby carriage with a sigh.

“If you would excuse me, then. Shall we go?”

Rio looked at Miharu, Celia, and Aishia, who were the closest nearby. Finally, he looked down at Latifa clinging to his left arm and patted her head. With some final parting words, they boarded the carriage and departed.

“I’m so envious of Lady Suzune. Lady Celia, Lady Miharu, Lady Aishia...” Charlotte mumbled sadly while watching the carriage go.

Watching her made Satsuki feel a little sad too, so she smiled brightly. “Times like this call for a bathing session together. Haruto said we were free to use his mansion whenever, so let’s make the most of it. I’ll wash your back for you.”

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After the carriage reached the noble district gate, Rio and the others disembarked and made their way out of the capital on foot. They proceeded down the main road out of the city until there was no one else around, then headed off the road towards the stone house where the spirit folk girls were waiting.

When they stepped past the barrier around the house, Sara and the others immediately came out.

"Welcome back."

"Shouldn't you be saying 'I'm home' to Miharu and Latifa instead?" Alma said, pointing out how they were the ones who had returned from the village.

"That's true... But everyone's also returning to the stone house."

"Hee hee, doesn't it work both ways?" Orphia suggested in amusement.

"We're home! And welcome back! Sara, Orphia, Alma, long time no see!" Latifa called out to them energetically, raising a hand.

"It's good to see the three of you well," Miharu said.

"Having everyone gather in the stone house really feels like coming home," Celia added.

"While it'd be nice to take a break like this...is it okay if we head for the village right away?" Rio asked everyone from where he stood beside Aishia.

"Sure. I want to see the village anyway," Celia said, nodding with strong interest and excitement.

"We're happy to hear you're so excited to go to our village." Sara grinned a little bashfully.

"It's going to be so fluffy! A fluffy paradise! I want to touch the fur of all kinds of people there."

"Ah ha ha!"

Everyone laughed in amusement.

"So let's get going already." Embarrassed, Celia blushed and urged them to depart.

"I'll put away the house, then. *Conditum*."

Orphia used the Time-Space Cache equipped on her arm to collect the stone house. The area where it stood immediately turned into empty space.

"Then I shall use the teleport crystal. There's a range to the effect, so please stay as close to me as possible. Especially since there's many of us."

"Okay!" Latifa took the lead by hugging Rio's right arm, while Aishia pressed herself up against him from the other side.

There's no need to be this *close, though...*

The effective range was around three meters in radius, so there was no need for seven people to pack themselves together so tightly. Rio's expression stiffened in shyness, and he lowered his gaze uneasily. "O-Okay.

Is this good?”

Feeling competitive against Aishia and Latifa, Celia clung to Rio from the front. The height gap between them meant her face was touching him in the chest.

“Y-Yes...”

Taken aback, Rio nodded uncomfortably. “...”

The remaining free space was Rio’s back. Miharu’s, Sara’s, Orphia’s, and Alma’s gazes naturally gathered on that point. And the first one to move was...all four of them. However, the one who started the closest to Rio’s back was Miharu. The other three were standing in front of him, so they took an extra moment to go around.

“M-Miharu...?”

At the unexpected sensation pressing against his back, Rio’s eyes widened. Since Sara and the others were in front of him, the only one who could possibly be behind him was Miharu—but that was exactly what was surprising to Rio. Miharu had never tried to cling to him before. He couldn’t help turning his neck to look behind him.

“I-I would appreciate it...if you didn’t look behind you...”

But Miharu’s trembling voice stopped him. Her face was dyed the deep shade of a ripe peach. She didn’t want Rio to see her like that.

“Wow, Miharu, your face is bright red,” Latifa said with wide eyes.

“I-It’s not red, though?” Miharu’s denial came out in a rather high-pitched voice. She could feel the heat from her own face.

“Umm, there’s no need to be pressed so close...” Rio tried to protest hesitantly.

“Everyone’s clinging too closely to Rio!”

“Isn’t it unfair that we’re left out, Sara?”

“Yes! Wait, no—?!”

“It’s fine. Please press together closer, or there’ll be no room for us.”

Sara, Orphia, and Alma crowded forward, making things even noisier and more cramped.

I-I can’t move...

Normally, Rio was capable of moving at rapid speeds to evade all enemy attacks, but he was completely helpless at this point. He was blocked in on all sides.

Rio tried to move his limbs a little, but the sensation of things that

shouldn't be touched was transmitted back to him. The noisy sounds of 'I prefer that, Sara!' and 'Your face is too close, Aishia!' echoed around him.

"I said there's no need to be this close..."

No one responded to Rio's reserved opinion.

Wh-Whatever. Let's just teleport away from here as quickly as possible, Rio said to himself, clearing his mind so that he could make a decision.

"R-Right, let's go now. I'm going to say the spell. *Transilio*."

He chanted the spell and activated the teleport crystal in his hand. The next moment, space spiraled and warped around Rio. Another moment later, the scenery changed completely. They had moved from the forest at Galarc's outskirts to the spirit folk village deep within the Wilderness. Position-wise, they were located one or two minutes' flight from the village town hall.

There was a time difference between the Strahl region and the village, but it was still bright where they had teleported to. Sunlight filtered through the trees and across the forest. There was a spring beside them and a blue sky extending above their heads.

At an ordinary time, this would have been a calm and peaceful space. However, since the women in the group had been making a fuss up until the teleportation, they hadn't noticed that they had arrived. This caused their loud voices to echo through the forest.

"We've arrived..." Rio said to the girls that were still clinging onto him with a sigh. He then looked around to confirm that they had teleported successfully—which was when he noticed a gaze from a certain direction.

Several people wearing what looked like traditional Japanese clothing were seated on the rocky bank of the spring. They were surprised by the sudden arrival of Rio and the girls—or perhaps they were surprised to see so many beautiful girls clinging to Rio—as they were blinking in wonder.

Why are they here...?

Rio recognized some of the people among them—they were people who should have been at the next stop of their trip.

He froze in bewilderment. The girls clinging to him naturally noticed his gaze and looked the same way. As a result, Rio's group and the people wearing kimonos stared at each other. Then, one man stood up from the group.

"Why are you here, Gouki?" Rio asked him. He was the senior warrior of the Karasuki Kingdom—Saga Gouki—and the former guard for Rio's mother

Ayame, with Rio's father Zen.

"We were told you would appear by this spring if we waited here..." Gouki scratched at his cheek awkwardly, then stopped to stare closely at the girls surrounding Rio. "I see you're in high demand, hmm? As expected of Princess Ayame and Zen's son." He burst out in hearty laughter.

"No, umm... This is... Ha ha."

Rio tried to brush it off by laughing. Miharu, Celia, and Latifa watched on, wondering who the man was. Meanwhile, the three spirit folk girls who had returned earlier seemed aware of their identities, as they were watching Rio's face instead. As a result, the air was rather awkward between them all.

"Don't trouble Sir Rio, dear."

Behind Gouki, his wife, Saga Kiyoko, scolded her husband in a cold tone. It was as though she were saying this wasn't the time to be joking around.

"R-Right." Gouki nodded awkwardly. "We were rejected by you once, but we hastened to join and serve you anyway. I know it is brazen of me to ask, but would you allow me another opportunity to convince you?" He lowered himself onto one knee, suddenly, appealing to Rio with humble reverence.

"Please, Sir Rio!" a young girl's voice shouted. The one who had spoken was Gouki's daughter, Saga Komomo. Beside her was her guard and attendant, Aoi.

"Komomo came along too, I see... And also..." Rio looked at the girl hidden behind Gouki and Komomo. There was a familiar boy immediately beside her.

"Shin and Sayo too..."

They were the siblings from the village Rio had lived in. Rio had said his farewells to them before leaving the Yagumo region, so why were they here? Rio had a serious look on his face as he contemplated the reason.

"Hey, Sayo. What are you hiding there for? Come on."

"W-Wait, Shin..."

In a sullen tone, Shin grabbed Sayo by the hand and forcefully pulled her into a spot where Rio could see her better. Sayo met eyes with Celia and the others clinging to Rio for a brief second, then ducked her head to avert her gaze with a nauseated look.

"..."

At the sight of Sayo's reaction, the girls surrounding Rio were all convinced that something had happened between them.

“Tch, have some more confidence.” Shin looked between Sayo and the girls beside Rio, then narrowed his eyes in a glare.

“At any rate, I’m glad to see you again. I was just thinking of returning to the Yagumo region, but how about we move somewhere else first? I’d like to greet the elders too.” Rio looked somewhat troubled, but eventually softened his expression into a smile.

“Of course. We’d be delighted.”

Gouki bowed his head deeply. Thus, the entire group relocated to the town hall first.

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At the town hall of the village, in a room on the highest floor...

Rio had his reunion with the elders: Syldora, Dominic, and Ursula. After they rejoiced in seeing each other again, Rio introduced Celia to them.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Celia Claire. Thank you for inviting me to the village.”

Celia stood up from her chair, lightly pinching at the hem of her dress to give a courteous bow. Her good upbringing was evident, making the elders and Gouki’s group widen their eyes.

“I am one of the head elders, the high elf Syldora. Welcome, teacher of Rio. These two are my fellow elders, fox werebeast Ursula and elder dwarf Dominic.”

“I’m Ursula. We’ve heard a lot about you from Rio. It seems Sara and the others have been in your company too. I hope you enjoy your time with us.”

“Welcome, little miss!”

And so, the elders all welcomed Celia.

“Little... Ah, thank you very much.” Celia’s eyes widened faintly at being called “little miss,” but then she giggled happily.

“Hello all.”

Just then, particles of light gathered in the corner of the room, and the high-class spirit Dryas manifested out of nowhere.

“Oh, Lady Dryas.”

“I sensed Aishia’s presence so I came to see her. You must be Celia. Sara and the others told us you’d be coming to the village. I’m Dryas,” she said, explaining her reasoning for appearing before them.

“You’re a humanoid spirit like Aishia... It’s nice to meet you. I’m Celia Claire. I’ve also heard about you from Rio and the others.”

“Yes, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Mine as well.”

After they exchanged greetings...

“Hmm...”

Dryas stared closely at Celia from head to toe.

“Umm... Is something the matter?” Celia asked, blinking.

“You have a high affinity towards mana for a human. You excel at the manipulation of ode, don’t you?”

“Do... Do I?”

“Yes, mana naturally gathers near your body. Consequently, the ode flowing out of you has a very beautiful wavelength. Rio’s is on a different scale, but you’re not bad yourself. On the same level as the high elf Orphia, or thereabouts. You’re almost like an elf—do you have any ancestors who were elves? Perhaps it’s hereditary.”

“How can you tell that?”

“I haven’t been a humanoid spirit for hundreds of years for nothing. Aishia would be able to tell you the same. Spirits can visually see mana as well as ode.”

“I see...” Celia swallowed her breath, impressed by the knowledge of a high-class spirit that had existed for so long. Aishia was on the same level of existence as Dryas and was unmatched in combat strength, but her quiet personality and lack of spirit-like speech made it hard to think of her as a high-class spirit.

“Now that Lady Dryas and the elders have been introduced to Celia, I’d like to speak to Gouki’s group...” Rio began to say, looking at Gouki’s party seated in a corner of the room. The group included his wife Kayoko, daughter Komomo, Sayo, Shin, and others, totaling ten people. There were familiar faces among them, so there was no doubt they all hailed from the Karasuki Kingdom.

“Indeed. Where should we start...” Ursula stroked her chin in contemplation.

“Have you all heard about how Gouki is connected to my parents already?”

“Yes. Though I must apologize for talking about you in your absence.”

“Not at all, I’m sure it was unavoidable in order for you to understand each other. That being said, there must be unfamiliar faces on each side and unclear parts of the situation, so how about I introduce you first?”

“Good point. That would be preferred.”

“First, these are the close acquaintances of my parents, Gouki and his wife Kayoko, and their daughter Komomo. Gouki is a senior warrior of the Karasuki Kingdom, which is located in the Yagumo region... The equivalent to the head of the highest military noble house in the Strahl region. The people around him are most likely his retainers. Those two over there are villagers from my father’s hometown: Shin and his little sister Sayo. Though I’m not sure why they’re here...”

Rio conducted his introduction of Gouki’s party to Celia and the others, gesturing at them with his hand. They each bowed in the order of their names being called out, so it was fairly clear who was who.

“My name is Saga Gouki. Ah, but names in the Strahl region are the other way around, so it’d be Gouki Saga. This is my wife Kayoko, and we both served Sir Rio’s mother, Lady Ayame, together with his father Zen. That was over twenty years ago.”

With a ramrod straight back, Gouki introduced himself and his wife to Celia and Miharu, who were seated beside Rio.

“I just introduced them to the elders, but this is my former teacher Celia Claire, my adopted little sister Latifa, and Miharu Ayase, whom I live with. And this is my contract spirit, Aishia. You’ve met Sara’s group before, I believe,” Rio said to Gouki’s group.

They stared at the girls in great interest. Miharu in particular had similar black hair to what would be seen in the Yagumo region, and her name also sounded like theirs, so she attracted more attention than the rest.

Gouki nodded. “Yes, we spoke to Lady Sara and her friends three weeks ago.”

“I was told there was someone who wanted to see me at the village, but that must have been you and your people.”

The surprise from the sudden reunion had faded, but Rio still looked a little troubled.

“Yes. I’m sure it came as a surprise to you, but we wanted to speak to you directly. Please forgive my insolence in following you without permission.” Gouki bowed his head low enough to touch the floor.

“I don’t consider it insolence at all. I’m just bewildered... I didn’t expect you to chase after me,” Rio confessed with a somewhat exasperated sigh. He could tell they hadn’t pursued him with superficial feelings, so he couldn’t get mad at them.

“You said you could return to Strahl alone so you didn’t need retainers, and refused us clearly. We also said we’d give up on accompanying you.”

“You said you’d give up on accompanying me, but you didn’t say anything about not coming after me. Is that it?”

“Well, basically.” Gouki looked a little guilty but grinned widely. Rio sighed once again at his energy and initiative.

“The journey to this village couldn’t have been easy by any means.”

Savage creatures were rampant, and there was no road to follow. There were harrowing natural disasters local to certain areas, and some places were enshrouded in darkness all year round due to abnormal weather, making it impossible to ascertain the direction of travel. Just making it to the village would have been a harsh trip.

“It was beyond our expectations, but we were prepared for it. We knew it’d be an ordeal, and it was a good training experience in the end. We were fortunate to make it without losing anyone.”

“As long as there were no casualties.” Rio let out a breath of relief.

“Well, we restricted our companions to those who could use spirit arts. My retainers are all trained in that area, and while they still lack experience, Shin and Sayo gave it their best as well,” Gouki said, looking at the siblings.

“I really didn’t expect you to bring the two of them.”

Rio looked at them a little awkwardly. *Why are they here?* That was the question in his head, but he felt too awkward to ask it out loud.

“...” Sayo looked like she didn’t know what to do with herself and kept her head down in shame. Shin seemed displeased by that and had his lips fixed into a frown.

“Sayo had rather strong feelings for Sir Rio, you see... When I spoke to her, she asked to come along with me, so I agreed. Shin is also a man with lots of promise, and he cares deeply for his little sister under that rough attitude of his. He asked to come along for Sayo’s sake. The two of them came all the way here without a single complaint.”

Gouki looked at the silent siblings and sighed lightly, scratching his cheek before speaking on their behalf.

“Hmph.” Shin snorted unhappily. He’d been brusque since back in the village, but now he was especially biting.

“Hey now, Shin. What are you sulking for?”

“I’m not sulking.” Shin denied Gouki’s criticism with a grim look.

“Goodness. Sorry about that, Sir Rio.”

“No, there’s nothing to apologize for... Did Yuba and Ruri agree to them coming?”

“Of course. They’re accompanying us with full permission.”

“I see. In that case, can I ask for the details on how you all made it to this village?” Rio asked.

“We made it to the village by complete coincidence. We left the Karasuki Kingdom merely days after you, but we only arrived at this village about a month ago...”

“Lord Gouki and his people wandered into our forest after Rio took Sara and the girls to the Strahl region. When we listened to their situation, we found they were headed the same way—and then Rio’s name came up. We couldn’t just chase them out after that,” Ursula explained.

“The three elders told us that it wouldn’t be long before Sir Rio returned to this land, so they invited us to stay as guests. We’re extremely grateful to this village,” Gouki added.

“I understand now, I think. That means it’s my turn to give my report next.” There was a somber light in Rio’s eyes.

Sensing the state of his mind, Gouki put on a serious expression and refrained from conveying any praise or celebration. “Sara told us the general gist of things. You were able to achieve your long-held desire. I have no words to express myself.” He bowed his head to express his deep respect for Rio.

“I suppose it’d be weird for me to thank you... And I’m not sure what to say to your people after you went through such efforts to get here.”

Gouki looked confused at Rio’s uneasiness. “What do you mean?”

“With Lucius dead, there’s no reason for all of you to come to Strahl anymore, no?”

In other words, all their turmoil was for nothing.

“...Ha! Ha ha ha! What are you saying?” Gouki burst into hearty laughter after a pause.

“...” Rio was baffled by what could be so funny about his words.

“Ah, my apologies for making a ruckus. With all due respect, Sir Rio, you’ve misunderstood something. Vengeance on Lucius, the man who killed Lady Ayame and Zen... While that was indeed one of our goals, it wasn’t the only one,” Gouki said with a tense expression.

“By which you mean...?”

“Our goal is to serve you. Lucius’s death is positive news, and not a reason to feel disappointment. Our efforts will only end in vain when we become unable to swear our loyalty to you.”

“To serve me... When you didn’t even know if I’d agree to it? I’ve already refused your accompaniment once in the Yagumo region, so I’m sure you could imagine me refusing you again... And there was no guarantee you’d find me just by coming to Strahl.”

Yet Gouki and the others came after him. Rio felt an indescribable emotion at that fact, which showed on his utterly bewildered face.

“None of those serve as reasons not to come after you. We may be able to serve you. That possibility alone is enough—that is why we came after you.”

“To the extent of throwing away the land you were born and raised on? Your servants in particular never even served my mother. Have they truly assented to this?”

Friends, family, finances, status. They would be discarding all of those things by doing this. Going on such a dangerous journey for a wish that may not come true—wasn’t that a rather rash decision? Rio looked at them as though to say just that.

“Hmm, how should I put this...” Gouki struggled to find the right words.

“Sir Rio. My apologies for speaking up as a servant, but would you allow me to make one statement? I would like to explain the emotions of the servants on behalf of Sir Gouki.” Aoi, who was seated beside Komomo, raised her hand to ask for permission to speak.

“Of course, I don’t mind...” Rio looked at Aoi.

“Thank you very much. With the exception of Shin and Sayo, all the servants here are orphans adopted by the Saga family. We were given warm meals, clothes, shelter, and a means of living. Thus, we owe a great debt to Sir Gouki and Lady Kayoko. We will follow them wherever they go, and we will serve who they deem their master. That is our source of happiness.” Aoi bowed her head deeply as she explained their thoughts.

“I see...” Rio said, barely managing a reply.

He wasn't born or raised as nobility, so it was difficult for him to put himself in their shoes. But that didn't mean he couldn't imagine it—he found their loyalty so admirable, he was almost astonished.

"We told the servants they could stay back with Hayate... But they all chose not to. Their loyalty is admirable, if I do say so myself," Gouki said with a slightly bashful grin. He then looked at Rio with a heated gaze and declared, "However, both my wife and I pride ourselves in having loyalty for Sir Rio that won't lose to theirs."

"Why would you go so far for me? Sure, my father was your colleague and my mother was the master you served, but..." Rio was confused. He could tell that Gouki and Kayoko were extremely loyal to him, but he didn't know the reason why. Was being Ayame's son that important?

"Kayoko and I were unable to fulfill our vow of loyalty to Lady Ayame in the past. So we thought we could direct that lost loyalty towards her son instead. But our feelings cannot be expressed with that alone." Gouki grinned shyly, rubbing at his neck in an embarrassed manner. The gesture made him seem embarrassed of his words.

"Lady Ayame and Zen were pursued by the kingdom and had to discard their identities, fleeing to the faraway lands of Strahl. We never thought we'd see them again, but one day their son shows up, bearing full resemblance to the two of them. That was the first time we saw Sir Rio," Gouki said happily after a pause.

"That brings back memories. It was around two years ago, if I recall." Rio also thought back on that moment with a distant look.

"I remember it as though it happened yesterday."

"Ha ha ha." Rio chuckled with nostalgia at Gouki's proud statement.

"After listening to his words, we found out that both Zen and Lady Ayame have passed from this world. That Sir Rio made his way to the Karasuki Kingdom knowing nothing more than the stories Lady Ayame told him in his childhood. That he wanted to construct graves for them. He had made such a dangerous journey to the Yagumo region just to do that. Going around countless kingdoms to locate someone who knew of his parents... It must have been a hopeless journey with no end in sight. When we learned of this, we didn't know what to feel..."

Gouki's words were brimming with emotion. Rio looked a little uncomfortable, but everyone else was listening with serious faces. They were

living vicariously through Gouki's words, wondering how the clueless Rio appeared to him when he knew the truth of Ayame and Zen's past.

"You were a dazzling existence to me. You were raised so well despite the harsh circumstances... I could only surrender to what a splendid person you ended up as."

In other words, Gouki had felt extreme empathy for Rio at the time. He believed Rio was a person worth respect even without considering Ayame and Zen. As a military man and as a warrior, he fell for Rio as a person. He had been filled with joy when he received the letter from Yuba about Rio, but he hadn't thought of swearing his loyalty yet. The more he got to know Rio, however, the more his resolution solidified.

"Of course, the fact that you're a memento from Lady Ayame and Zen plays a big part, but it's all because it's you. We want to serve you because of the person you are—if we remained in Yagumo without swearing our loyalty, we would be living the rest of our lives in vain. That was something we were sure of. So how could we sit around waiting just because we were rejected once?"

Gouki gradually got more heated the more he spoke, but he seemed to realize that himself and paused. "At any rate, that's the reason why we left the kingdom and came after you. Did that explain things clearly?" he asked shyly as he looked at Rio.

"...Yes." Rio nodded after an awkward pause.

"In that case, I'd like to ask you once more: will you allow us the honor of swearing our loyalty to you?"

Gouki got out of his seat and proceeded to kneel on the floor before Rio. Kayoko, Komomo, and the other servants followed his lead quietly. The room focused on Rio for his response.

Even asking for favors made him feel awkward. Rio hesitated for a long moment before expressing his disapproval. "Honestly speaking, I'm not used to having someone swear loyalty to me. I doubt I'll get used to it in the future, and I don't think I can act like a master to you all. I'm not good at giving other people orders either."

"I can imagine. I am well aware of your personality."

Gouki seemed to have predicted such a response and had a strained smile on his face. However, he fixed his heated gaze on Rio to convey his desire to serve in spite of this.

“I understand everyone’s feelings. That’s why I won’t ask that you return to the Karasuki Kingdom. I’m at a loss.”

True to his words, Rio’s mouth was drawn into a completely stumped frown.

“Then...?”

Does that mean you’ll approve of us becoming your retainers? Gouki seemed to sense the possibility of that happening and looked at Rio in surprise.

He had imagined Rio would have answered based on the conclusion that he wouldn’t take Gouki and the others on as servants. No matter how difficult it was to reject them, the former Rio would have done so firmly, as he had done when he refused their accompaniment the first time.

So what about now? While he expressed his disapproval, he hadn’t given a clear no. Far from it, in fact.

“I cannot answer you right now... Could you give me some time to think about it?”

“O-Of course! Take all the time you need!” Gouki was unable to hold back his elated feelings and shouted his response. That was only understandable—for someone who wished to become one of Rio’s retainers, it was a great step forward. He hadn’t planned on giving up easily at a rejection, but this was a welcome miscalculation for someone who had prepared for a much longer battle.

Has accomplishing his long desire changed something within Sir Rio’s heart? Or perhaps it was the influence of these girls around him...

Gouki turned his gaze to Miharu, Celia, and the other girls around Rio. If there was something that had changed during his time away from Rio—other than the vengeance being achieved—it would be the presence of these girls. The elders seemed to have made the same assumption, believing Rio would refuse, as their eyes were widened as well.

“So please stand up for now,” Rio asked, trying to lighten the mood and relaxing his shoulders.

“This calls for a reunion banquet tonight!” Dominic suggested with a hearty laugh.

“You just want to drink, don’t you?” Ursula shrugged in exasperation.

“That aside, I’m sure there’s more you wish to discuss. Many of you are meeting for the first time, so it would be a good chance to interact with each

other more.” Syldora summed up the discussions with a smile.

“Indeed. Whether you have an answer by the banquet or not, give it some thought, Rio.”

Rio nodded slowly at Ursula’s suggestion. “I will.”

“In that case, we shall excuse ourselves until the banquet. There’s no rush for a reply, so please give it as much thought as you need.”

Gouki offered for his people to make themselves scarce until they met up again at night.

◇ ◇ ◇

Leaving the elders in the town hall behind him, Rio headed for the guest house he had used when he previously stayed in the village. Komomo looked like she wanted to come with him but ended up going her separate way until the later banquet. This left Miharu, Celia, Aishia, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, and Alma to accompany Rio.

“This is the house we stay at while in the village,” Rio explained to Celia at the front door, inviting her inside.

“Whenever Onii-chan’s at the village, we all live together!” Latifa boasted smugly to Celia.

“Is this what you call a tree house? It’s so spacious on the inside... What a lovely home. I was thinking this as we walked earlier, but the people of this village really live in harmony with nature.”

Naturally, the wood of the host tree was being used as is, creating a space filled with a wooden warmth. It was a type of building that couldn’t be seen in Strahl cities, so Celia looked around the interior with great interest.

“Thank you very much. Please think of this place as your own while you’re here,” Sara said proudly as a resident of the village.

“The bathing room in this house is also quite delightful, so try it out at night,” Orphia noted.

“We’ll have to show you around the village too,” Alma added.

“Yup, I’m looking forward to it!” Celia nodded enthusiastically.

“It’d be nice if we could bring Aki and Masato here again someday. Right, Miharu?” Aishia said to Miharu out of consideration.

“Yeah.” Miharu nodded with a bright smile, though there was a faint trace of sadness to it.

Just then, Rio turned to everyone. “How about we take this chance to go for a walk around the village?”

The girls all exchanged looks. After hearing the conversation between Gouki and Rio earlier, they seemed to have their own thoughts about it. They tried to convey those thoughts to each other with just their eyes.

“Is something the matter...?” Rio asked, noticing how the girls were all making eye contact with each other.

“Onii-chan... If you need to talk, we’re here for you, yeah?”

As his adopted little sister, Latifa spoke on behalf of the girls. The rest of the group silently nodded along, expressing their agreement.

“You’re referring to Gouki and the others, right?” Rio smiled a little awkwardly on the receiving end of the girls’ gazes.

“Yeah.”

“I know the general direction I want to take... I’m just unsure of how to do it in a way that will make everyone happy, so I haven’t gathered my thoughts yet. Right. Would you be willing to hear me out? Everyone else too.”

“Of course!” The girls all agreed to Rio’s humble request in unison.

“Let’s sit on the chairs, then. I’ll take out the tea I prepared from the Time-Space Cache earlier.”

“I’ll help, Orphia.”

Orphia and Miharu headed towards the living room first. Rio and the others followed after them. Preparations were completed in a mere ten-odd seconds, and everyone sat down. The girls then naturally waited for Rio to start speaking, and after a while...

“Like I said earlier, I’m not capable of becoming a master to anyone. If they swear loyalty to me as retainers, I wouldn’t know how to interact with them as their master. That’s why I’m opposed to the idea of taking them on...” Rio began.

“But when I look at you now, I can see you want to answer Gouki and his people’s feelings. That’s why you’re wavering, isn’t it?” Celia said, watching Rio’s expression as though to seek confirmation.

Rio confirmed her statement with a strained smile. “Well, yes.”

“Does that mean you intend on taking Gouki’s group on as retainers?” Sara asked next.

“No... I don’t want retainers, but I’d be willing to live with them on equal footing like with everyone here... Gouki and the others are all important

people to me, just like you all."

He had no confidence in his ability to act as a master, so he was opposed to making Gouki his retainer. But if they insisted on staying with him anyway, he wanted to grant their wishes. The solution he came up with was for them to be comrades.

"I see..." The girls seemed to be thoroughly convinced by that.

"Why don't you tell them that, then?" Miharu suggested while watching Rio's expression.

"Yes, I agree," was Celia's endorsement. The others also uttered their agreement.

Rio scratched his cheek, unsure. "I'm not sure Gouki will accept that..."

"Why? I don't see why not..." Celia looked surprised.

"If Gouki's people are fixated on becoming retainers, they might find my proposal disappointing..."

I can't make you my retainers, but do you want to come along? Was that the reply Gouki and the others truly desired? Rio couldn't help but ponder that.

"I believe you're giving it too much thought..." Sara said with a wry smile.

Celia agreed tiredly. "Right. It's a bad habit of yours."

"Have more confidence, Onii-chan! It'll definitely go well!"

Latifa pumped her fist to cheer Rio on. Rio looked a little embarrassed at that.

"If Gouki and his people join me, they'll naturally end up interacting with you more... Are you all okay with that?" he asked, changing the subject subtly.

"Yup. They seem like really nice people, so I'm looking forward to talking to them at the banquet tonight," Latifa replied with great curiosity.

Miharu giggled in agreement. "That's right."

"Then it won't be a problem if they end up living together with us."

"No. All that's left is for you to tell them how you feel."

"Ah ha ha... Right." Rio chuckled weakly and nodded.

"Say, Rio... A master-servant relationship can come in all shapes and forms. You may not think you're capable of standing above others, but I don't agree. That's probably why Gouki and the others want to serve you as well—like Latifa said, have more confidence. Right?" Celia smiled with a

one-sided dimple as she gave her opinion from the point of view of a noble. That made Rio's expression brighten as well.

"Right." He nodded.

"Hmph. As expected of Celia. You weren't Onii-chan's teacher for nothing." Latifa's cheeks puffed up like a balloon. Other than Aishia, the other girls all looked similarly envious.

"N-No no, I didn't say anything special," Celia said, flustered.

"Well, that aside... There's one thing I wanted to ask Onii-chan before the banquet."

"What is it?" Rio met Latifa's eyes and stiffened in wariness.

"Umm, you know. We might end up living together with them from now on, so we need to know more about them, don't you think?"

"Uh, I guess..."

There was nothing wrong with what she was saying, but for some reason, Rio had a bad feeling about it as he agreed with her.

"Then, a question! What happened with that Sayo girl? And that Komomo girl too." Latifa's hand immediately shot up in the air as she fired off her questions.

"U-Umm...?" Rio was flustered by the sudden interrogation.

"Based on Sayo's reaction, something definitely happened between you two at the Karasuki village, didn't it?"

"Uh... I wonder about that..." Rio tried to feign ignorance, but—

"That's a lie! That's definitely a lie! Right, girls?!" Latifa sought agreement from Miharu and the others.

"Indeed."

Everyone nodded in agreement. Celia had been avoiding the prying questioning, but she took the chance to nod along with them. Thus, an encircling net of questions was laid around Rio within moments.

"I-It's a private matter." Rio averted his eyes guiltily.

"See! Something happened! That answer means something happened!" Latifa glared at Rio.

"Spare me..." Rio groaned, at a complete loss. Thus, the time before the banquet was filled with a barrage of questions from the girls.

◇ ◇ ◇

Finally, the banquet was upon them, and it was to take place in the large dining room in the village town hall.

"Listen up, everyone! There'll be no stiff greetings tonight. We drink, and we talk! Cheers!" Dominic raised his glass with enough momentum to splash the ceiling. Of course, he wasn't tall enough to actually reach the ceiling...

"Cheers!"

Glasses were raised across the room, accompanied by cheering voices. Rio also raised his glass and tapped it against Miharu's, Celia's, Aishia's, Latifa's, Sara's, Orphia's, and Alma's.

"Cheers, everyone!" Dryas skipped over and clinked her glass against them all one by one.

"Latifa! Rio! Sara...and everyone else!"

"Ah, it's Vera and Arslan!"

Latifa's close friend—and Sara's little sister—Vera came up to them, waving her hands enthusiastically. Behind her was the lion werebeast, Arslan, and the chief warrior of the village, Uzuma.

"Long time no see, everyone!" Vera's silver wolf tail wagged happily as she greeted them.

"It's been so long, Vera!"

"Yes! I've missed you so much!"

The two girls hugged each other, rejoicing in their reunion. Arslan shot them an exasperated look before turning to Rio.

"Hey, Rio."

"It's good to see you again, Arslan. And you too, Uzuma."

"Yes, I'm glad to see you in good health, Lord Rio."

"You too, Uzuma. Although Aki and Masato stayed behind in Strahl..." Rio said.

"We heard about that last time Sara and the others returned. Masato still owes me that sparring match. Ugh..." Arslan muttered, disappointed.

"Masato wanted to see you too, Arslan. It might take some time, but I'll figure out a way to bring them here again someday."

"Please do."

"Leave it to me." Rio nodded. He then looked over at Gouki and the others from Yagumo, who were waiting a few meters away. "Hold on, I'm going to say hello to Gouki."

He started walking, but—

“Ah, we’ll come too.”

The others who were listening to the conversation followed behind him.

“Will you allow me to make a toast to you all?” Rio checked over his shoulder for the people following him, then started talking to the group by raising his glass.

“Of course!” Gouki replied with delight, having been waiting for Rio to approach them.

“Cheers.”

Rio and Gouki tapped their glasses together as the others present raised theirs.

Gouki gulped down the contents of his drink and started chatting merrily. “This is such a nice banquet, isn’t it? I enjoy a good banquet wherever I go. And the alcohol in this village is superb! I was surprised to see they had Yagumo drinks as well.”

“The dwarves probably made it. There’s no one in this village who appreciates a good drink more than them.”

“So it seems! I have confidence in my ability to hold a drink, so I was shocked when the high-ranking dwarves of this village all turned out to be heavy drinkers.”

“It sounds like you adapted to the village well.”

“Only thanks to you, Sir Rio. Things were really tense until your name came up.”

“This village has always been extremely hesitant about accepting humans... But how did my name come up?”

“We figured if we came across this village on our way to Strahl, then there was a chance you did as well. There was no guarantee, but I believed it was possible you stopped on your way and asked them.”

And it was worth the attempt.

“I see.”

“This village is full of experienced warriors, including Lady Uzuma over there. With the disadvantage in location and numbers, there’s no doubt we would have been captured if we responded wrongly.” Gouki laughed heartily with a glance at Uzuma. “That aside, I want to hear your tales too, Sir Rio. Komomo and Sayo have been wanting to speak as well. May they join in?”

The two girls had been restlessly listening to the conversation beside them, so Gouki glanced over and sought permission from Rio to include

them.

“Sure. And I’d prefer it if you didn’t worry about formalities like that, truly. It’s in the past, so please forget my mother’s status,” Rio requested with a frown.

“That’s a rather difficult request... But I understand. You heard him, come join the convo. There’ll be no standing on ceremony tonight.” Gouki beckoned them over.

“My little sister and my friends have been wanting to talk to the three of you as well,” Rio said, looking at Latifa and the others behind him.

“Oh, what an honor. I previously heard that you have an adopted sister, so it’s a pleasure to finally meet Lady Latifa in person. As mentioned earlier, I am Gouki Saga, former guard to Rio’s late mother, Lady Ayame.” Gouki bowed his head low before Latifa, extending his deep loyalty to her as well.

Latifa stiffened at the strong display of respect towards her, then bobbed her head with a polite curtsy. “Ah ha ha... I’m not related by blood to Onii-chan’s mom or dad, so there’s no need to be so formal. My name’s Latifa. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Blood connections are irrelevant when it comes to Sir Rio’s little sister. May I ask how old you are? At a glance, you seem to be the same age as Komomo...”

“Umm, I’m thirteen.”

“I see. That makes you one year older than Komomo.” Gouki glanced at his daughter.

“Wow, really? Let’s get to know each other, Komomo!”

“Yes, Lady Latifa.” Komomo gave a cute smile and energetic reply to Latifa’s greeting.

“There’s no need to call me that. I don’t want to be called a ‘lady’ by someone my age, and we’re only one year apart... Right? There’s no need for titles.” Latifa looked embarrassed.

Komomo hesitantly looked between Gouki and Rio. “But you are Sir Rio’s sister...”

“I want to become friends with you... Do you not want to be friends?” Latifa cocked her head uneasily, watching Komomo’s expression. Social status and position were barriers to forming friendships. For the daughter of an established warrior who was trained in etiquette, social standing was an important matter. It was a difficult issue to address, but...

“I would like to ask the same of you, Komomo,” Rio requested.

“Umm...” Komomo was in clear conflict with herself.

“The people in question are saying this themselves. It wouldn’t hurt to agree to a friendship in this case.” Gouki smiled gently and gave his permission. He felt a slight objection himself, but he was capable of considering the circumstances and adapting to them.

Komomo took a long, deep breath and said Latifa’s name nervously. “Then... Latifa...?”

“Yup! Please be good to me, Komomo!”

“...Of course!”

The two exchanged friendly smiles.

“Let me introduce my friends to you next! Do you know them already? This is Vera, and beside her is Arslan.” Latifa pulled Komomo by the hand and led her over to where Vera and Arslan were behind Miharu and Sara’s group. Thus, the younger ones began mingling with each other.

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“Thank you very much, Sir Rio,” Gouki said.

Rio shook his head pleasantly. “It was nothing.”

“If I may ask something I’ve been curious about—are you from the Yagumo region, Lady Miharu?” Gouki asked.

Black was the typical hair color in Yagumo. The facial structure of the Yagumo people also resembled that of Eurasian people on Earth, and they had similar skin tones to those of Asian people. A Japanese person would blend in with them rather naturally, making Gouki’s misunderstanding of Miharu understandable.

“No, Miharu’s circumstances are a little special... Have you heard of how there are heroes from other worlds being summoned in the Strahl region recently?”

“Yes...”

Either he didn’t understand the words, or he understood the words but couldn’t process them, as Gouki nodded awkwardly with a blank look. Kayoko, Sayo, Shin, and the other servants all looked similarly puzzled beside him.

“Well, it is confusing.”

Rio exchanged a look with Miharu and chuckled.

“It may be hard to believe, but I came here from another world.”

“Does that mean...Lady Miharu is one of those heroes?”

“No, I’m not a hero...”

“Miharu’s friend is the hero. Miharu was dragged into that friend’s summoning and ended up in this world,” Rio added as explanation.

“Haruto saved us when we wandered into this world without a clue,” Miharu further explained.

“Haruto...?” Gouki cocked his head at the unfamiliar name.

“Oh, I’m sorry! By Haruto, I mean...” Miharu had used the name ‘Haruto’ out of reflex, but when she realized Gouki and the others didn’t recognize it, she apologized in a fluster.

“It’s the name I’m using in the Strahl region.” Rio was used to speaking his explanation, having done so many times now.

“S-Sorry...”

“Don’t worry, I was going to explain it to Gouki anyway.”

“Why did you need to change your name...?” Gouki asked, sensing that there must be a reason from Rio’s expression.

“The truth is...I was once falsely accused of a crime in Strahl...”

“What?!” Gouki’s voice took on a sharp tone at that revelation.

“It hasn’t caused any real inconveniences for me so far, so don’t worry about it.”

It would probably be best to explain his past life as well, but that wasn’t a topic for a cheerful banquet. Rio decided to stay silent about it for now.

“Hmm... I understand.”

Gouki nodded reluctantly. He wasn’t that easily convinced, but he didn’t want to dig into it further during an event like this.

“At any rate, that’s the reason why I don’t use the name ‘Rio’ in the Strahl region. I met Miharu while using the name ‘Haruto,’ so she’s used to calling me that. Very few people know that my real name is ‘Rio’ over there.”

“Is that so...”

“We’ve wandered away from the topic, but Miharu is most certainly from another world.”

“It’s a far-fetched story, but it’s coming from you. I have no choice but to believe it. Such sorcery must exist in the Strahl region.”

“It’s extremely ancient sorcery from the age of the gods, so it’s impossible to recreate using modern sorcery. Some ancient magic artifacts with the sorcery sealed inside all activated at once for some reason. It caused a bit of a stir in Strahl for a while. Sorcery isn’t widely used in Yagumo, so I’m sure it’s even more confusing to you. She does have the hair and facial features of someone from the Yagumo region.” Rio chuckled out of consideration for Gouki.

“Indeed. I almost mistook her for the beautiful daughter of some noble family. She reminded me of Lady Ayame in her youth—wouldn’t you agree, Kayoko?” Gouki finally broke into a beaming smile. Reminded of Ayame, he turned to his wife with a gentle look.

“Yes. My first impression of her was a well-natured young lady. She definitely resembles Lady Ayame.”

“I... I look like Haruto’s mother?” Miharu blushed.

“Lady Ayame had long hair as well. It was a glossy black like Lady Miharu’s, and the length was exactly the same too. Hmm.”

Gouki retold his memories enthusiastically, not noticing the change in Miharu’s reaction. However, Kayoko, Sayo, and all the female servants including Aoi picked up on it.

“Is that...so...” Miharu touched her own hair with a face like a blushing maiden.

“Ha ha ha, sorry for doing all the talking.”

“Not at all, I wanted to listen to you from the beginning.”

“If you only learned of us after arriving at the village, then that’s only natural. It’s much better speaking directly than having things explained by hearsay. That’s why we only asked for the bare minimum of updates about you from Lady Sara and her friends. Pardon my enthusiasm.”

“Many things happened after I left Yagumo...”

“I can imagine. You have many people with you as well.”

“Yes.”

“Be that as it may... There are so many interesting people around Sir Rio, it renders me speechless. That’s right. You also said Lady Celia was your teacher?” Gouki looked around at the people near Rio warmly, then focused on Celia, who hadn’t been brought up yet.

“I’m not that great of a teacher, but I did instruct Rio up until he was twelve years old.”

“Which would be four or five years ago, hmm? But you appear, ah, a little young for that? I’d say you seem to be the same age as Sir Rio...” He actually found her to look even younger than Rio, but he chose his words carefully.

“Celia’s only five years apart in age from me,” Rio said, calling Celia’s name without a title.

“Oh? And that’s why you seem close?” Gouki hummed in great interest seeing them speak to one another. Kayoko also looked at Celia with a glint in her eye. Meanwhile, Sayo was watching Miharu and Celia with an entranced gaze.

Lady Sara’s group, Lady Miharu, and Lady Celia are all beautiful people... And so is Lady Aishia standing right beside Sir Rio.

Her face had fallen completely at the sight of all the girls around Rio. They were all like princesses—fundamentally different from her, an ordinary village girl. Rio was just as wonderful as he had been before, but would he even spare a glance at her now that he was surrounded by all these lovely women?

Those were the woes tormenting Sayo. At the same time, she felt even more embarrassed for confessing her feelings to him before he left the Yagumo region.

"..."

Shin looked between Sayo and Rio in silent displeasure.

"As for Lady Aishia... I can feel something extraordinary in her aura." Gouki took notice of Aishia's beauty and impenetrable guard. From that, he could guess that she possessed exceptional abilities as well.

"I'm not surprised you noticed. Aishia is very strong."

"Oho... I did hear that Lady Aishia is a high-ranked spirit like Lady Dryas. And that she has a contract with you, Sir Rio..."

"She slept within me for a long time due to the contract."

"So she was asleep when you first came to Yagumo."

"Yes. She woke up after I parted ways with everyone and arrived back in Strahl. We've been together since then."

"Haruto's always taking care of me," Aishia said when Rio looked at her.

"I should be saying that," Rio replied. "Aishia's saved me many times now."

He introduced her to Gouki and the others.

"Ha ha ha, you seem to be great friends. With everyone else, as well... Perhaps that—or the fact you accomplished your greatest desire—is the reason why your aura seems to have changed, Sir Rio." Gouki smiled at Rio and Aishia, then looked around at Miharu, Celia, Sara, Orphia, Alma, and Latifa as he spoke.

"If so, that's definitely thanks to everyone else. I wouldn't have changed if I were by myself. The only thing that would have changed after I got my revenge would be to shut myself off more."

"You were blessed with meeting a great number of people," Gouki said earnestly, seeing Rio express his feelings honestly.

"I truly was," Rio agreed with a gentle smile. The girls listening to the conversation around them blushed in response.

No no, you really have changed. The shadow hanging over you has weakened a lot. Boys can change so fast, if you blink you'll miss it, Gouki thought in awe. There was still a faint shadow over him, but he no longer rejected the people entering his space.

"That aside, are you free to discuss the matter of becoming my retainers right now?" Rio said, bringing up the earlier topic.

"O-Ooh. Of course!" Gouki nodded immediately. He didn't have a bad feeling about it thanks to the flow of their previous conversation, so his voice

was lively with expectation.

“In the end, I don’t think I can become anyone’s master. All the more so for wonderful people like you and your wife. And so, I cannot say that I will employ you as my retainers, but...” Rio trailed off, taking a breath to prepare himself. He fixed his gaze on Gouki and said, “If you don’t mind, would you like to travel together without becoming my servants? We won’t be together constantly, but at least for some of the time.”

“What does that mean, exactly...?” Gouki asked nervously, unsure of how to interpret those words.

“Like a friend, a comrade, family... I’d like to get along with you on close terms like that. That’s why I won’t give you or your people any orders. Of course, you can return to the Karasuki Kingdom whenever you wish, and you’re free to move separately for any periods of time. How does that sound...?”

“G-Goodness me... You want to interact with us not as servants, but as family?” Gouki bit down on his lip, his body trembling.

“It may not be the answer you wanted, but...is it an acceptable alternative? If you insist on becoming servants, then you may reject the idea.”

“N-No, I would never! We are extremely delighted to receive such deeply thoughtful consideration from you.”

Rio had emphasized that it was okay to reject him, but Gouki shook his head furiously, bowing his head low.

“I see... In that case...would that be okay with you?”

“Y-Yes! Of course, of course it would!” Gouki nodded his head over and over again. Kayoko and the other servants bowed low beside him.

“Thank goodness... I was actually thinking of visiting the Karasuki Kingdom next. I’m sorry you’ll be turning back after making it all the way here, but would you like to go together? I’m sure you’re worried about the people left behind too.”

A weight must have lifted from Rio’s shoulders, as he let out a sigh of relief. He informed Gouki of his intention to visit Yagumo next and invited him along.

“Oh... Oh, it would be our greatest pleasure...! We shall gladly accompany you!” Gouki bowed his head repeatedly in a dramatic gesture, expressing his happiness.

“Seems like the matter’s settled. Now let’s get drinking!”

Dominic, who had been watching over the scene nearby in wait for the right moment, raised his glass and interrupted.

“Yes, let’s. Cheers to our future.”

Rio chuckled, his expression softening as he made eye contact with Gouki, and raised his glass.

“CHEERS!”

With Dominic’s voice at the forefront, the dining hall burst into lively cheer.

◇ ◇ ◇

Nearly one hour later, at the banquet hall...

The feast was underway, and excitement was rising in the air. Alcohol had made its way into the systems of those drinking, splitting those who paced themselves from those who were drunk off their feet. Those too young for alcohol were drinking juice, but an example of one of the less drunk participants was Sayo. Her shy personality and lack of courage made her actively avoid talking to strangers.

As a result, Sayo only spoke with Gouki’s servants, but when the servants spoke to those from the spirit folk village, she would swiftly disappear behind them. Rio and the girls occasionally drew near, but she shrank back out of nervousness and kept herself at just a far enough distance to make any conversation difficult.

That naturally left her alone with her brother the entire time, and Shin’s personality made it hard for him to get along with the spirit folk villagers. This created an anti-social space with a blunt brother and shy sister within. However, Shin seemed discontented by Sayo’s inability to talk to Rio, and he frowned as he drank his alcohol.

Meanwhile, Komomo’s natural communication skills had made her the best of friends with Latifa and the others. She integrated into the childhood friends and obtained a position beside Rio, allowing her to rapidly become closer with the villagers that came to greet Rio for his return. However...

“Sir Rio, Sir Rio.” Komomo tugged at Rio’s sleeve.

“What is it, Komomo?”

“Why don’t you talk to Sayo as well? She’s been looking forward to meeting you a lot. And besides...” Komomo said, looking at Miharu, Latifa,

Celia, and Sara's group. They all looked like they wanted to talk to Sayo as well, but the incessant crowds of people coming to talk to Rio had made it difficult for them to start a conversation. They still hadn't made any contact with her, which Komomo tactfully noticed.

"I've tried to do so a few times, but it seems she's avoiding me. No... Perhaps I've also been avoiding her myself. I understand."

Rio had noticed how Sayo placed herself at a distance, but the same applied for him. He gathered his resolve and decided to walk towards her.

"Eek..."

While she hadn't come near him, Sayo had been constantly gazing at Rio the whole time, so she noticed immediately when he walked towards her. She didn't think he was coming to talk to her at first, but when she realized he was making a beeline her way, her eyes darted around in a fluster. Eventually, they were a close enough distance to have a clear conversation with one another.

"Good evening, Shin, Sayo."

"...'Sup."

Shin lifted his glass up in his left hand casually, giving Rio a curt greeting.

"Do you have a moment to..."

"Shin! It's not ''sup'! Sir Rio is royalty. How could you be so rude...!"

"...Aren't you the rude one for cutting him off?" Shin pointed out with a smirk.

"I-I'm so sorry, Sir Rio!" Sayo apologized in a panic.

Rio smiled in amusement at the two of them. "It's fine. I'd prefer it if you treated me like how you did in the village."

"You're such a coward. He's saying it's fine too, see?"

"Sh-Shin! That doesn't mean you can forget your manners!" Sayo scolded him, worried about the gazes of Miharu and the others behind Rio.

"I'm glad to see you're both as close as ever," Rio said with relief. Seeing him interact with someone they didn't know well yet made Miharu, Celia, Latifa, and the other girls listen in curiously. This made Shin notice the number of girls surrounding Rio.

"I see you're still keeping a lot of women by your side. Who knows how many girls in the village cried because of you..." he muttered sullenly, glaring at Rio.

“Huh?” the girls all responded at once. They all perked up attentively at the mention of Rio making women cry, focusing their stares on his back.

“D-Don’t use such misleading words.” Rio broke into a cold sweat at the gazes on his back.

“Th-That’s right, Shin! Sir Rio didn’t make anyone cry! If anything, they were all delighted!”

“That phrasing has its own problems...” Rio mumbled quietly at Sayo’s indignant protest.

“Huh? He at least had you bawling your eyes out. After he rejected you and left the village,” Shin said, dropping an even bigger truth bomb.

The village girls were all...delighted?

Huh? Rio made Sayo cry?

Does that mean Sayo confessed to him?

Wha?! No one mentioned this!

The gazes on Rio’s back intensified. Latifa had led the questioning for details on Sayo before the banquet started, but Rio had used her privacy as a shield to hold his silence.

“Huh?!” Sayo’s face was red enough to catch fire.

“...”

Rio felt like he was standing on thin ice. He froze in shame, then forced a fake smile.

“Hmph.”

Shin snorted, satisfied to see Rio so uncomfortable in front of Miharu and the others.

“Sh-Shin! What are you saying?!”

Sayo snapped back to her senses and whipped around to face Shin.

“It’s the truth, isn’t it?”

“Th-That doesn’t mean you should say it in front of Sir Rio! Ah, umm, I confessed to Sir Rio before he left the village, but I was utterly rejected... S-So don’t worry! I’m sorry for acting out of line! P-Please forgive me!” Sayo confessed the truth herself out of thoughtfulness for the girls—or perhaps her strong awareness of them.

“I-It’s not something to apologize for, right?” Rio hurriedly called out to the girls, who agreed with him one awkward beat later. They were still processing the shocking revelation.

“R-Right...”

Since Sayo had admitted it herself and Rio hadn't denied it, things must have happened as Shin described. But the circumstances of the time were still unclear. Thus, they continued watching over the outcome in confusion.

"That's right. He's the one who should be apologizing," Shin jeered, gulping down his drink. His face wasn't very red, but the alcohol might have been affecting him.

"Shin, are you drunk?! How many glasses have you had?!"

"I'm not bothered to count. And we're talking about him right now. I've got something to say to him."

"Sir Rio, I'm so sorry about this! Shin's really drunk right now! We'll be leaving now!" Sayo apologized in a panic, pulling at Shin's sleeve as he tried to approach Rio.

"Shut up. Listen, when this guy left the village, he said he wouldn't bring you. In other words, he wanted to avoid carrying dead weight like you. Yet now he's surrounded by a ton of other women. What do you think that means? He didn't bring you because you had no charm? Huh?" Shin glared angrily at Rio. His expression looked more sulking than irritated.

So something like that happened...? Miharu stared at Sayo as she listened.

"Hey, Shin. You know that's not..." Gouki began as he approached to warn Shin, as he had been listening nearby. But Rio silently raised a hand to stop him.

"At that time...the reason why I rejected Sayo's accompaniment was because I couldn't respond to her feelings. I was about to depart on a journey for vengeance. I couldn't say that I didn't mind her coming along on such a trip. It's exactly as you say—I didn't want to bear such a burden. That feeling applied for my entire journey, but..." Rio trailed off awkwardly after saying that much, looking around at Miharu, Celia, Latifa, and everyone else.

"It's embarrassing to say, but many things happened. Would you like to talk about it? I want to tell you what happened to me, and I want to hear about what happened to you two as well." He looked between Shin and Sayo nervously.

"..."

Perhaps it was because Rio had responded rationally—or perhaps Shin had somewhat predicted Rio would respond rationally—but Shin refrained from making any further emotional comments and fell silent in shame.

"It's only natural for Shin to be angry. Your beloved little sister was made

light of... I have a little sister too, so I can understand." Rio glanced at Latifa as he spoke with remorse. Then, he looked at Sayo. Sayo's eyes were averted from Rio and the girls awkwardly, and Shin was watching her in turn.

"I'm not angry about it. Honestly, I was thinking of punching you if you pushed Sayo back at this point."

Shin's gaze met Sayo's, and he frowned like a child who wanted to make friends but couldn't be honest with himself. He probably understood that Rio hadn't exactly done anything wrong.

When Rio left the village, Shin and Sayo learned of Rio's background from Gouki. That's why he wanted to be understanding of Rio's circumstances.

Back when Rio was in the village, he gave Shin the impression of some distant young man who was oddly trying to keep people at arm's length. Shin found that creepy, and he honestly didn't like him. But after learning the truth, he realized that state was the most natural for Rio and felt a bit happy to be able to understand Rio better.

He had accepted Rio as a member of the village despite finding him creepy, so he was glad he learned more about Rio—even if it was the fact he had an awful past under his cool face. He also believed leaving Sayo behind was the right thing to do. If Rio had said he didn't mind her coming along with him, Shin would have been filled with resentment, demanding he take responsibility.

However, when he saw him acting friendly with girls other than Sayo after rejecting her and leaving the village... As an older brother, Shin was driven by the urge to give Rio a piece of his mind, which was why he'd spoken so harshly to him. But Rio was the one to approach them, saying he wanted to talk to them...

The truth was, Shin was really happy about it. He had actually worried over how to talk to Rio as royalty when they reunited, so he was happy when Rio asked him to interact as he did back in the village. But he couldn't be honest with himself, so Shin still looked like he was sulking.

"Will you talk with me, then?" Rio asked somewhat shyly.

"...Yeah." Shin was embarrassed as well, nodding with downcast eyes.

"Oh! I have a great idea!" Latifa raised her hand energetically. If Latifa, who could be said to make the mood of a conversation, was making a statement at a time like this, then...

“What is it, Latifa?” Miharu turned to her with a hopeful voice, sensing that something fun was about to happen.

“I understand what happened clearly. Onii-chan is a man of few words, so Sayo must have felt uneasy too. So! Sayo and Komomo should come stay at our place tonight! We can all talk together in a girls-only gathering! And Onii-chan and Shin can have their all-guys gathering!”

“Ha ha ha, what’s this? That sounds interesting. Let me join that drinking group.”

“Heh, may I participate too, then?”

At Latifa’s suggestion of such a gathering, Dominic and Gouki immediately spoke up.

“Sounds interesting.”

“Well, why not?”

Rio and Shin were also on board with it.

“That aside, Shin. I warned you so many times to watch your behavior around Sir Rio, yet in the end...” Gouki shot Shin a disappointed look, but didn’t criticize him further in consideration of Rio’s wishes.

“Wh-What? He said he didn’t mind.” Shin flinched as he made a feeble excuse.

“You’re still meant to show respect, fool.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Rio said to Gouki in a fluster.

Thus, the lively night continued.

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Another hour passed, and the banquet continued to go smoothly. Those who maintained their drinking pace and the few who didn’t drink much had opened up to each other in excitement.

The all-guys and all-girls parties were still to be held after the banquet, but that didn’t make it unnecessary to interact with others before then. Thus, in a corner of the dining hall, the residents of the stone house and the Yagumo group gathered together to share drinks with those they’d be living together with. The elders joined them.

Shin was completely drunk and red-faced as he happily bickered with Rio; Sayo clearly wasn’t as stiff as she had been at first. She’d relaxed enough to enjoy her alcohol in a calm manner.

When the drink in her glass ran out, Sayo quietly stood up to leave. People got up every now and again to get more food and drinks, so it wasn't a particularly conspicuous action. However...

"Hey, Sayo. Where are you going? Wasn't there more you wanted to say to this guy?" Shin spotted her trying to go and called out to her, grabbing Rio around the shoulder.

"Sh-Shin...! I'm going to get a drink and some fresh air." Sayo bobbed her head up and down in apology to Rio before trying to leave.

"I'm going to get a drink too." Miharu gazed at Sayo's back, then excused herself to Aishia beside her and followed Sayo. Then, she gathered her courage and called out to her. "Sayo."

"L-Lady Miharu? C-Can I help you?" The unexpected call from an unexpected person made Sayo reply nervously.

"Umm, you can leave off the 'Lady,'" Miharu said with a frown.

"I-I can't do that." Sayo was merely accompanying Gouki's family as an apprentice servant. They saw Rio as their master, so his friends were also in a position requiring respect.

"Then, if you could at least use 'Miss' instead."

"I'll... I'll do my best."

"I'm sorry for surprising you. I was hoping we could talk alone for a bit."

"With me?" Sayo blinked blankly after hearing Miharu's reason for calling out to her.

"It's, well...about Haruto..."

"I-I'm sorry. I didn't know Sir Rio was royalty at the time, but I should have known my place," Sayo apologized earnestly, having guessed at what Miharu wanted.

"E-Err... There's nothing for you to apologize for, I think? I'm not sure what to do with such an apology..." Miharu looked confused at the unnecessary display of reverence and fear.

"U-Umm... I'm sorry..." Sayo apologized again.

"Heh... Hee hee." Miharu giggled.

"I-Is something the matter?"

"Err, I was just thinking about how similar we are..."

"Me...and you...?" Sayo cocked her head blankly. In her eyes, Miharu appeared so graceful, her good upbringing clear unlike her village-born self. Above all, she was extremely cute. She couldn't see any similarities.

“Yes. I heard you told Haruto your feelings for him when he was leaving your village...”

“R-Really?” Sayo was still confused, not understanding how that could be a reason for their similarity.

“Umm, the truth is...I’ve also told Haruto my feelings before...” Miharu said, coming out to Sayo about what had happened during the Galarc banquet.

“I-Is that so?”

“Yes. Because of that, Haruto nearly distanced himself from me... So I thought we were similar.”

“B-But Sir Rio said you were allowed to stay with him, right?”

“That’s because, well... In my case, I was too stubborn to give up... And Ai-chan helped me out a lot...”

At the time, she had just learned that Rio was Amakawa Haruto, but reborn, and couldn’t sit still about it. She failed to suppress her emotions and pressed through with her persistence. When she looked back on it now, she felt truly embarrassed about it—enough for her face to gradually redden. Of course, she didn’t regret it at all, but...

“But if Ai-chan hadn’t helped me, I would have been pushed away, just like you. That’s how strong Haruto’s determination was. It made me realize just how heavy the weight he felt in this world was...”

He couldn’t abandon his identity as Rio and live as Amakawa Haruto. That’s why he couldn’t give up on his thirst for revenge—that was what Rio once told Miharu.

He had his life and relationships that he had built up as Rio. She couldn’t deny that identity of his. And now that she knew how heavy his burdens were by growing up as Rio, Miharu couldn’t demand that he remain as Amakawa Haruto. She had no intention of asking that of him.

However, despite that, she was still in love with Rio. She was still in love with Haruto. Because she had reached that answer for herself, Miharu told Rio that she wanted to stay with him. By telling this to Sayo now, Miharu recalled that feeling. Furthermore, this journey could lead them to Rio’s roots; that was the feeling Miharu had after meeting Sayo and the others Rio had built relationships with as Rio.

“Is that so...”

Sayo gazed at Miharu in empathy, and Miharu gazed back in turn. She felt

an indescribable feeling of sympathy after listening to Sayo's story. As someone who had also confessed her feelings and was nearly pushed away for it, Miharu couldn't help but call out to Sayo. Like that, a silence fell over them, creating a shared space that only the two of them occupied.

"Err, as for why I suddenly called out to you... I wanted to talk to you about a few things..." Miharu faltered, trying to continue what she was saying. "And I was hoping we could be friends." She ended with a shy smile.

"If you don't mind someone like me, then..." Sayo nodded eagerly.

"Then let's get along, Sayo."

"Y-Yes, La... Miss Miharu." Sayo was about to say "Lady," but mustered up her courage and dropped the title.

"Oh, no fair! These two are sharing an intimate moment alone!" Latifa ran over to Miharu and Sayo, having left the group for a drink.

"I was just asking her to drop the "Lady" title and talk to me like a friend. And we discussed Haruto a little. I'll tell you later, Latifa." Miharu giggled.

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Interlude: A Conversation between Ruler and Saint

In the Proxia Castle, at the arena where Rio once crossed swords with Nidoll while infiltrating in search of Lucius's whereabouts...

There was a short boy with a halberd and a skinny man. The boy was Kikuchi Renji, who had worked as an adventurer after he was summoned into this world up until a short while ago. The skinny man was none other than the Proxia Empire's ambassador, Reiss.

Renji wielded his Divine Arms—the halberd—while running around the arena field.

"Ha!"

Renji was currently in the middle of combat training. Reiss had positioned himself in the spectator seats at a place with a good view, creating countless spheres of light and firing them at Renji from afar.

"Haaagh!"

Renji ran through the encircling net of light, occasionally swinging his halberd to mow down those who approached too close.

Hmm... He's able to move well now. His assessment of the situation has become more accurate as well.

Reiss thought in praise of Renji's growth while controlling the rain of light. Just then—

"Sir Vulfe."

A knight ran over to Reiss. He seemed to be in a hurry, as he was panting slightly. Incidentally, "Vulfe" was Reiss's family name when he was working as the Proxia Empire's ambassador.

"What is it?"

"The emperor has summoned you. Please make your way to the audience hall immediately."

"The audience hall..." Reiss placed a hand over his mouth in thought.

I wasn't given any advance warning, so it must be an unexpected visitor.

Someone he's willing to meet when he has no interest in government affairs... Either a very important guest, or a rare and unexpected one.

Reiss guessed that much in an instant and smiled. It was most likely that Nidoll wanted Reiss present for that meeting.

"I understand. I shall head there immediately. Please inform Renji that he is to train by himself for now."

With those words, Reiss ceased casting the countless light orbs and left.

What...? Is training over for today? I was finally getting warmed up too...

Surprised by the sudden end of the attacks, Renji looked up from the field and watched Reiss leave with a disappointed expression.

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Ten minutes later, Reiss had arrived at the audience hall of the Proxia Castle. At the farthest end of the room, facing the door, was the platform where Emperor Nidoll Proxia sat on the throne, looking down on the visitor in the hall below the steps.

There were only two people in the room other than Reiss. Reiss hid in a position that couldn't be seen by the visitor to watch the scene.

Well, this is a rather rare guest. Reiss stared at the visitor and twisted his mouth in a crooked beam. It was a black-haired woman in a habit-styled dress. Normally, one wouldn't be allowed to raise their head before Nidoll without permission, but...

"What kind of nation can't even offer a guest a chair? How boorish this so-called Proxia Empire must be."

The woman showed no particular reverence towards Nidoll and strongly expressed her displeasure instead. Her tone was calm and polite, but the content of her words was awfully provocative. A textbook example of superficial courtesy.

"Bwa ha ha, the boor that barged in for an audience with no appointment is preaching manners? What absurdity." Nidoll didn't appear to be bothered by the woman's words and attitude, laughing it off heartily.

He's enjoying himself.

Having known him for a long time, Reiss could trace Nidoll's thoughts somewhat well. Nidoll normally lamented the boredom of staying inside the castle all the time, so he probably found the sudden appearance of an

aggressive conversation partner amusing.

"Since you accepted a sudden meeting with a stranger, I had high hopes the Proxia Emperor would be a broad-minded person... I guess I was wrong. You're just a small fry who can't even look at your conversation partner from the same eye level," the woman said sadly, intentionally provoking Nidoll.

"You're not completely unknown to me. You're the famous saint, aren't you?" Nidoll smiled with the calmness of an emperor, guessing at her identity without falling for her provocations. Indeed, the woman was Saint Erica.

"Oh, you've heard of me?" Erica's eyes widened in surprise.

"I received word that one of my remote vassal states was overthrown and a new nation established."

"Word sure reached you fast."

"It was an interesting change in the boring state of international politics. It left an impression on me. What is your goal? Visiting the ruler of the suzerain state to the nation you overthrew with a revolution, all by yourself. Quite the whimsical move, really," Nidoll said with a chuckle.

"I merely came to observe this nation and meet its ruler," Erica replied, boldly yet calmly.

"Observe what, exactly?"

"The lifestyle of the people in this nation and whether they're being oppressed by the ruler—which would be you."

"Ha ha, ha ha ha!"

"What's so funny?"

"A suspicious woman claiming to be the saint suddenly arrives and declares she's judging whether the people are being oppressed to the emperor himself. Who wouldn't laugh at that? It certainly isn't the work of someone sane. However..." Nidoll stared at Erica, suppressing his laughter.

"I'm perfectly sane, though." Erica cocked her head curiously.

"Very well... So how did this nation appear in your saint's eyes?"

"I'm not looking at the nation, but the people living within it. In other words, the citizens and their ruler."

"I consider that to be the same thing. And?"

"Allow me to get straight to the point. Abdicate the throne and hand the nation to the people immediately. That will lead to the salvation of the people." Erica glared coldly at Nidoll, who reclined in his throne arrogantly.

"I cannot see how dragging the ruler from his throne will lead to salvation

for the people. What if I refuse?"

"Punitive justice," Erica declared without hesitation.

"Oh? Would you like to try that right here and now?" Nidoll grinned in challenge, welcoming a fight. He gripped the hilt of the broadsword he carried everywhere with him, even the audience hall. However...

"No, now is not the right time. There's no revolution without the will of the people. The people of this nation must first learn." Erica shook her head calmly.

"Not the right time, you say? After making your way to the very heart of the empire and declaring war, do you expect to walk away freely?" Nidoll gestured to his sword, threatening to stand up and draw it at any moment.

"In that case, I have no choice."

Erica didn't falter. A beautiful khakkhara-like mace appeared out of seemingly nowhere, which she grasped in her hand. She stared back at Nidoll flatly, as though she thought nothing of him—like he wasn't even worth her notice—and assumed a fighting stance.

The air between the two of them was on the verge of erupting, when Nidoll suddenly spoke up.

"I believed you a foolish woman drunk on power beyond your means, but it seems you're no mere jester. You're more of a wicked witch." After staring at Erica's face in suspicion, Nidoll lowered his hand from his sword hilt. He deemed Erica a witch, not a saint.

"Heh. Heh heh heh. Calling a saint a witch? What harsh words."

It was at this moment that Erica showed a human-like emotion for the first time. Her mouth twisted in an ecstatic grin.

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“Oh? That’s a rather remarkable expression. Not something one would imagine from a saint,” Nidoll pointed out with delight.

“Why, excuse me.” Erica covered her mouth to reapply her saintlike smile.

“Hmph. You really are a wicked witch.”

“If that’s how you see me, then that’s what I must be to you. I’m aiming for your neck, so it’s only reasonable. There’s no way an arrogant emperor could understand the ways of a saint bringing salvation to the people.

“You think of the people, guide the people, and bring them salvation. I understand that is your image of a saint.”

“Why, I’m so pleased you understand me.”

“And I also know you’re not actually thinking of the people. A surface-level saint.”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about...” Erica tilted her head, mystified by what Nidoll was referring to.

“So you’ll continue your foolish jester act, hmm? Fine. Let us see who can steal more of the people’s lives.”

“Steal the lives of the people? I truly don’t know what you’re talking about.” Erica sighed tiredly.

“You sure can talk for someone so blatantly picking a fight. I’m saying I’m willing to take you up on the war you want so much—and where there’s war, death is inevitable. You’re not telling me you don’t know that, are you? Not after taking so many lives during the revolution that refounded the nation.”

“It is a necessary evil to save more of the people, but it is still unfortunate. However, if it comes to war, I will stand at the front. I shall suppress civilian sacrifices to the absolute minimum.”

“What confidence. In that case, we have nothing else to discuss. Get out of my sight.”

“Oh, you’ll let me leave just like this?”

“Did you want to stay?” Nidoll returned Erica’s curious question with an equally dubious one of his own.

“...No.”

“Then leave. Exit this room and show yourself out of the front gate.”

The next time we meet will be on the battlefield, Nidoll implied.

“Goodbye, then.”

Erica turned on her heel and left through the open door of the audience hall. This left Nidoll and Reiss alone in the large room.

“There’s no mistaking the fact that she’s a hero. The khakkhara she revealed was a Divine Arm,” Reiss said, appearing before Nidoll.

“From her blatant provocation, she clearly didn’t mind causing an incident right here and now. She seemed to be extremely confident in her abilities, but she was overly aggressive even considering that. She appeared insane, yet calm. A troublesome woman for a hero.” Contrary to Nidoll’s words, his tone seemed thrilled with the events.

“It will depend on how much of the Divine Arm’s power she can draw out, but she may be far more troublesome than the Black Knight currently rewriting the power structure of Strahl with his flashy actions. Heroes can’t easily be killed either, so all the more so...”

Reiss sighed uneasily.

“With Lucius dead, I can’t make a move against him anytime soon. I shall take this chance to track the saint’s movements.”

With that, he started walking towards the door Saint Erica had exited from. Nidoll watched him leave in silence.

“Bringing salvation to the people isn’t the work of the sane, but that woman spoke of salvation while understanding that. That hostile behavior... What could her true goal be in establishing a religious movement...?” he mumbled to himself.

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Meanwhile, Saint Erica left the audience hall and walked out to the garden of the Proxia Castle, accompanied by several knights. Once she reached the gate...

“This is the exit.” The knights accompanying her stopped, gesturing for Erica to leave.

“Thank you,” Erica said with a bright smile, then marched straight for the gate, passing through it while under the watchful eye of the knights and guards. After walking far enough for the imperial castle to shrink in size behind her, she stopped and turned around, staring at the castle with a cold look.

As expected of the ruler of a large empire—he’s no fool. Perhaps I should

try a different approach next time. The problem is where to go...

Galarc, Beltrum, Centostella. Those nations were the candidates that came up in Erica's mind. They were all well-known nations with large populations.

Come to think of it...

Erica remembered something after a pause.

The Ricca Guild is located in Galarc, if I recall correctly. A merchant guild with that much influence over other kingdoms could be used to an advantage. Perhaps I'll drop by before visiting the king. My next stop shall be the Galarc Kingdom. First, I'll book a meeting with the president of the Ricca Guild. Time to meet up with the others.

Erica decided on her next destination. Her mouth twisted in a grin as she distanced herself from the Proxia Castle with light footsteps.

Chapter 4: New Reunions, New Meetings

Two weeks after Rio and the others left the Strahl region and arrived at the spirit folk village, they quickly set out for the Yagumo region after staying for a few days.

The group consisted of Miharu, Celia, Aishia, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, and Alma. On top of that, Gouki, Kayoko, Komomo, Sayo, Shin, and Aoi accompanied them too.

Due to the limit on how many people could be transported at once, the majority of Gouki's subordinates had to wait in the village. Even then, it was a large group of fourteen people.

Incidentally, Orphia's contract spirit Ariel could materialize with some control over the size of its body. At its largest size, it had a length of nearly ten meters, but that size expended more magic essence so it rarely ever took that form.

For the purpose of travel, Ariel took a decently large size that could carry seven people on its back, and the freely flying Rio, Aishia, and Orphia carried the remaining four people. There was a slight scuffle over who would carry whom, which was resolved by settling on a rotation system. The journey itself went smoothly, and they arrived in Yagumo without encountering any of the harsh weather or monsters of the Wilderness. Thus, they first headed for the village where Rio's father Zen was born.

That said, reaching a single village amongst countless others in one go was difficult. They knew the general location, so they descended at a village in the vicinity and asked for directions to the village Yuba governed. The villagers would feel wary if so many suddenly visited at once, so Gouki and Kayoko went inside on behalf of the group.

As a result, they were fortunately able to ask the direction of Yuba's village from the first village chief they encountered and set off towards it from the skies.

"It's that village. There's no mistaking it."

Rio spotted the right village from the air and called out to the others

around him.

Mom and dad's graves are there.

He had spotted his parents' graves on top of a hill. They appeared as nameless graves to everyone else, but Rio could identify who they belonged to.

"The villagers will be shocked if we land inside it, so let's descend outside," Rio said, lowering his altitude. Aishia, who was carrying Miharu, and Orphia, who was carrying Celia, followed him. One beat later, Ariel also began its descent.

"Please get down here," Rio said to the two people he was carrying.

"Okay!"

The first to reply energetically was Komomo. After being released by Rio's arms, she landed on the ground with a light hop.

"Before I get down, I want to recharge on Onii-chan Energy!" Latifa squeezed Rio tightly from behind before also hopping down. Indeed, Rio had been carrying Komomo and Latifa. The two were on the smaller side and wanted to talk to each other, so they asked Rio to carry them together.

"Hey now, that hurts," Rio protested gently.

"This has been Komomo from the front and me from the back. Thanks for carrying us. Here's a thank-you hug!"

"You're welcome. Are you tired, Komomo?"

"Nope! Thank you for carrying me such a long way, Sir Rio." Komomo bowed respectfully. Miharu and the others also got down and thanked the people who had carried them.

"So this village is where Rio's father was born and raised..."

"It's a lovely and tranquil place. The sky is clear and calming."

Celia and Orphia approached Rio first. They were several hundred meters away from farmland, and past that, Yuba's village could be seen. Celia was looking around at the rural landscape curiously, while Orphia was breathing in the countryside air.

"Shin, it's our village..." Sayo hadn't believed she would ever be able to return again. She stood next to her brother and gazed at the village blankly.

"We suffered so much leaving this place, yet we came back in an instant."

The journey had still taken over one week, but their trip to the spirit folk village had taken many months. Shin looked at Rio's face with a half-exasperated look of incredulity.

“Shall we get going?”

“First stop is to greet Lady Yuba. I’m sure she’ll be surprised.” Rio and Gouki led the way to the village.

“Onii-chan’s grandmother and cousin, huh... I’m getting nervous.”

“It’ll be all right. I told you before, they both said they wanted to meet you.”

Now that the moment was finally here, Latifa showed unexpected shyness, fidgeting restlessly. Rio reminded her that her fears were unfounded.

“But I can kind of understand how Latifa feels.”

“Me too.”

Celia and Miharu pressed their hands to their chests as though to calm their heartbeats. Sara, Orphia, and Alma, who had never met Yuba and Ruri, looked similarly nervous.

“There’s no need to be so stiff. They’re just a normal grandmother and cousin... You’re going to make me nervous as well,” Rio chuckled with a troubled smile.

“Lady Yuba and Lady Ruri are both kind people, so there’s no need to worry. They’ll treat Latifa and everyone else like family,” Komomo boasted. She had previously visited Rio’s place and stayed together with Yuba and Ruri for a while, so she knew them well. She showed no sign of nervousness, looking more excited to see them again.

“Let’s go already.” Aishia urged the group to hurry—a rare sight coming from her. She didn’t appear nervous, but she may have hurried the group along out of eagerness to meet Yuba and Ruri. In that sense, she was acting differently. She appeared to be in a brighter mood than usual.

At any rate, the party moved down the road, eventually stepping onto the farmlands of the village. The time was still midday, and the weather was clear. They must have arrived during lunch break, as there were tools left along the side of the road. There would probably be a gathering of people eating farther down the road—that’s how things had worked back when Rio was here.

It sure brings back memories.

Rio felt slightly homesick as he looked around the fields happily. At the same time, the girls watching him caught a glimpse of his excitement at returning to this village. Because of that, they showed consideration and refrained from talking to him, letting him enjoy the scenery quietly.

Less than a minute later, Rio and the others arrived at the village square. As Rio expected, the villagers were gathered there eating lunch. Ruri could be seen among them, chatting with the others cheerfully. The villagers all got along with each other well.

The villagers were engrossed in their conversation, but even they would notice a group as large as Rio's party approach. They first looked up in surprise, wondering who it was, but when they spotted the familiar faces of Rio, Shin, Sayo, Komomo, and Gouki, their surprise increased even more.

"...Rio?! Shin and Sayo! Komomo and Sir Gouki too?!" Ruri stood up and ran over to them first.

"Hey." Rio seemed to feel shy at his reunion with his cousin, grinning like a normal boy of his age.

"H-Hey... Wait, what?! What, why?!" Ruri was taken aback by the unexpected reunion and looked between Rio's and Sayo's faces multiple times. But after a while...

"I see... You met up with Rio. Good, good." A load seemed to have lifted off Ruri's chest, her eyes watering in relief.

"Safely too," Rio nodded with a shrug.

"Woooo!" The villagers in the square all cheered.

"Long time no see, you guys!"

"Welcome back!"

"Give us some warning, yeah?!"

"Wow, it's Sir Rio! It's been a while!"

"Shin! Sayo!"

The villagers ran over to Rio, Sayo, and Shin. They then all piled on top of them to celebrate their return. A few steps behind them, Miharu and the others were left wide-eyed by the enthusiasm of the villagers.

"Bwa ha ha! Sir Rio sure is beloved by the villagers." Gouki laughed heartily at the welcome Rio received.

"W-Wait a minute, everyone! I know you're all excited, but this is too much! Back away, back away! We can't hear anything like this!" Ruri controlled the villagers with practiced ease. Satisfied by the amount of skinship accomplished, the villagers backed away obediently.

"Goodness... Are you okay, Sayo? Rio?" Ruri sighed tiredly, worried for Rio and Sayo.

"Hey, I was crushed as well," Shin protested for himself.

“You look fine to me. You’re a boy anyway.”

“The same goes for Rio, yes? And he’s way stronger than me!” Shin objected, pointing at Rio. The familiar sight of their bickering had the villagers laughing heartily.

“Good. You both seem fine.”

Ruri ignored Shin and helped fix Rio’s and Sayo’s clothes. “Then, once again. Welcome home, Rio, Sayo, and Shin as well,” she said, welcoming their return.

“Yup, I’m home.”

“We’re home, Ruri.”

“...Yeah.”

The three of them spoke their replies somewhat shyly. The villagers around them also yelled their greetings, welcoming their return.

“Komomo and Sir Gouki, Lady Kayoko. Long time no see as well. Aoi too. It’s good to see you’re all in good health.”

“Indeed. The same goes for you, Lady Ruri. Is Lady Yuba well?”

“Yes, as always. Oh, and Sir Hayate was here a short while ago, but he’s good as well. I’m sure he’d be delighted to hear you’ve returned.”

“Ho ho, that’s good to hear.” Gouki smiled broadly at the news of his son.

“Then, if I may change the topic... Who are these people?” Ruri cut off the conversation and looked over at Rio’s companions Miharu, Celia, Aishia, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, and Alma. The villagers were similarly curious and their gazes all gathered on them as well.

“...”

Miharu and the others had uncomfortable expressions and held their breath. They seemed nervous under the attention.

“They don’t seem like Gouki’s or Sayo’s acquaintances... Which means they’re Rio’s?” By the process of elimination, Ruri made a guess and looked at Rio for confirmation.

“Well, yeah.” Rio nodded shyly.

“Hmm...” Ruri stared closely at Miharu and the girls.

“Hey, Rio. One moment. Over here.”

She pulled him by the arm and turned him away from the others so they couldn’t hear. She then wrapped an arm around him and hunched over to whisper.

“What?”

“Don’t ‘what’ me. Well?”

“Uhm... I just said they’re my acquaintances?” Rio was confused by the sudden whispered talking.

“That’s not it, ugh! I’m asking which one’s your girlfriend!” Ruri raised her voice in impatience.

“G-Girlfriend?! N-No... Uh, how should I put this...” Rio struggled for words. He was having a hard time figuring out how to explain his relationship to everyone. They weren’t lovers, but calling them friends sounded a little too shallow. Especially since it was Ruri he was talking to—he wanted to introduce them properly.

Calling them “companions” sounded like a good fit, but there was another term that he wanted to use.

“Family...is the closest word I can use, I think.” Rio turned back to everyone watching him and Ruri as he uttered those words nervously.

“Y-You’re in a relationship with all of them?!” Ruri let out a dumbfounded noise in shock. The meaning behind a relationship was only known to those involved, but that seemed to have caused an unfortunate misunderstanding here.

“Huh? Yeah.” Rio nodded curiously.

“Y-Yeah...?” Ruri was speechless for a moment, before she lost her composure rather spectacularly. “Argh! Enough! Enough is enough! H-Hey, Rio. I don’t think that’s very appropriate of you. As your older cousin, I can’t say I approve.”

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“U-Uh, I think you’ve got the completely wrong idea here,” Rio finally realized.

“What’s with all of them being so cute, anyway? Rio, were you always such a sucker for pretty faces? And is Sayo okay with this?!” Ruri seemed to have been quite shocked by this news, as she continued on down the road of her misunderstood thinking.

“W-Wait, Ruri! You’ve definitely misunderstood something! I’ll introduce them properly, so calm down.”

“M-Misunderstood? What have I misunderstood here?”

Rio had grabbed Ruri by the shoulders in a fluster, attempting to correct her mistake. Meanwhile, the other girls saw his speech take on a more natural tone than usual.

“Onii-chan seems really close to Ruri,” Latifa commented, as though she were seeing something rare.

“Yes. He’s talking to her like he does with you and Aishia, on very familiar terms. He looks like he’s enjoying himself.”

Celia spoke with a pleasant smile, but she seemed somewhat saddened and envious at the same time. On one hand, she was glad she could see a side of Rio she didn’t know, but on the other, she felt conflicted that it wasn’t directed towards her. She yearned to be the one who could bring out such rare expressions on his face.

The same seemed to apply to the others too; everyone had a similar look on their faces. Meanwhile, the villagers watching the girls were able to guess at their relationship to Rio by those expressions.

The boys grit their teeth while looking at Rio, then glanced at Shin to question him. Shin nodded in confirmation.

“Oh, now I remember. Back when this guy was in the village...”

The young men recalled the hardships from when all the young girls were in love with Rio. They glared at him as if to curse him with their gazes.

“I’ve told you about how I have an adopted little sister, right? And my teacher whom I owe a lot to as well. The others started living with me due to various circumstances, so I came back to the village to introduce them all to everyone...” Rio explained, looking over at Celia and Latifa to beckon them closer. But when he realized the village boys were glaring at him, he closed his mouth in hesitation to call them over.

“H-Huh, really?” Ruri looked at Latifa and Celia happily. However...

“Hey, Rio!”

“Are you seriously living with all these cute girls?!”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“Why is it always you?!”

“That’s right, it’s unfair! Introduce them to us already!”

The boys closed in on Rio with their protests.

“I’ll introduce them to everyone, so just wait. Hold on a moment!” Rio tried to stop them with his hands, but it was a futile attempt.

“Good, go get him.” Shin cheered his friends on while Sayo scolded him in a fluster.

“Don’t spur them on, Shin!”

“It’s fine. This is the last step of acceptance towards Rio,” Shin said knowingly. In reality, the boys had teasing smiles on their faces, so it was clear they were just messing around. Like Shin said, this was their way of welcoming Rio back to the village.

“R-Ruri, save me...” Rio said, seeking some kind of safety net.

“You know I can’t stop them once they get like this. Sorry! I’ll show everyone the way to Gran’s place, so catch up to us once you’re free, Rio!”

Ruri seemed to be enjoying the situation, as she spoke with a cheery voice. She clapped her hands together and bowed her head at Rio. Then, she approached Miharu and the others and called out to them in a friendly manner.

“Hi, everyone. I’ll show you the way to my place, so follow me. Come on!”

“Umm... But...”

Miharu and the girls looked at Rio hesitantly, wondering if it was all right to leave him behind. Rio was sandwiched between the boys of the village and was being shaken violently for answers to their questions.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. It happened frequently back when he was in the village. And keep up, Sayo.” Stifling a giggle, Ruri encouraged the girls to get moving.

“Hmph. We’re going as well, Sayo.” Shin huffed triumphantly and pushed Sayo along.

“Hmm... It’d be tactless to stop the villagers from conducting their welcome. It’s not like anyone’s getting hurt either. Let us go as well.”

It would be easy for Rio to slip out of that circle if he wanted to. The fact

he didn't meant he wasn't as unhappy about it as one would think. With that thought, Gouki, Kayoko, and their servant Aoi followed after Ruri as well.

By the time Rio was finally freed, the others were completely out of sight.

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After that, Miharu and the others were shown to the village chief Yuba's home by Ruri. They had just arrived at the house when Rio caught up to them and they entered the house together.

Yuba was just as surprised as the other villagers by the unexpected guests, but when she spotted Rio and Gouki among them, she was even more surprised. But she soon regained her composure and exchanged reunion greetings with Rio and Gouki, then listened to a summary of what had happened since they arrived in the village.

"Ah ha ha, that was unfortunate."

Yuba cackled when she heard Rio had been crushed by the village boys.

"Wow, Granny's in a good mood," Ruri mumbled, guessing it was because Rio had returned.

"That aside... You've brought a rather large group with you." Yuba looked around at the faces of the girls Rio had brought, humming in wonder. The girls all seemed to be nervous, as they were kneeling on the floor stiffly.

"And they're all beauties to boot. No wonder the younger villagers were making a fuss."

"Right? I was surprised too." Ruri nodded her agreement to Yuba's stifled laughter.

"Well? Hurry and introduce them," Yuba pressed.

"Well, starting with the two I mentioned while I was staying here... This is my former teacher Celia and adopted little sister Latifa," Rio said while gesturing with his hands.

"Oho."

"Next to Latifa, starting from the right are Sara, Orphia, and Alma. The three are from the same village, and they always give me a helping hand on a daily basis," he then said, introducing the three from the spirit folk village.

"Then there's Miharu and Aishia, who started living together with me after various circumstances. The seven of them are as important as family to me," he said, scratching at his cheek shyly while explaining their relationship

to him.

“In other words...they’re people you’re dating with the intention of marriage?”

“N-No, that’s not what I meant...” Rio ducked his head in embarrassment.

“Hee hee, I’m just joking. It seems like you were able to meet some good girls. You have a much better expression on your face... It reminds me of Zen when he snuck Lady Ayame out to visit the village,” Yuba said, teasing Rio with a gentle look in her eyes and a smile.

“Ha ha ha, it was quite the ordeal back then.”

Gouki and Kayoko also smiled at their fond memories of those times, their emotions showing keenly on their faces.

“Everyone. I’ve never been able to do anything grandmother-like for Rio, but thank you for treating him well.”

There was no sign of Yuba’s usual to-the-point way of speaking as she bowed her head at the girls courteously.

“N-No, we should be saying that!” Miharu, Celia, and Sara lowered their heads in a fluster.

“Rio’s the one always taking care of us.”

Orphia and Alma returned the bow. Aishia imitated the others; the usually taciturn girl had a gentle smile on her face.

Meanwhile, Latifa was still being shy in front of someone she didn’t know, bowing meekly along with everyone in silence.

“Hey, I’m really curious about each and every one of you, but...if Latifa is Rio’s adopted sister, then that makes you my cousin as well, right?” Ruri asked.

“It would also make her my granddaughter,” Yuba added.

“Huh? Ah, yes... I’d be delighted if you thought of me that way.” Latifa nodded shyly, keeping her eyes downcast.

“Aww, how adorable. I’ve always wanted a little sister. It’s nice to meet you, Latifa... Can I just call you by your name like that? I mean, I’m already calling you that, but...”

“Of course. Can I just call you ‘Ruri’ as well? And...Granny Yuba...”

“Definitely! Please do!”

“Indeed.”

Ruri and Yuba agreed happily.

“Eh heh heh, thank you very much.”

“Aww! You’re so cute! Let’s talk a lot, okay?” Overcome with emotions at Latifa’s shyness, Ruri hugged her happily. She then turned to address the others. “And everyone else too!”

“So, how long will you be in the village, Rio? We’ll hold a welcome feast for you all tonight, but it looks like these girls could talk forever at this rate,” said Yuba.

“I’m thinking of heading to the capital in the near future with Gouki’s family, but could Latifa and the others stay in the village during that time? I’m afraid there are too many people to take on an unannounced visit...”

“Naturally.” Yuba nodded warmly.

“Thank you very much. I believe I’ll be back after a two-week stay there, so please look after them for that time.”

“This is your home as well. There’s no need to be so reserved.”

“Right...” Rio’s face crinkled in a shy smile.

“Then it’s decided. Shin, Sayo. While you two go and greet the other villagers, can you inform them there’s a feast tonight?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Right away.”

At Yuba’s request, the siblings stood up.

“In that case, I’ll help with the cooking. I’ve brought plenty of ingredients and alcohol too,” Rio offered, causing Miharu and Orphia to promptly offer their assistance as well.

“Yay! We get to eat your cooking again,” Ruri cheered happily.

Thus, just like when they visited the spirit folk village, another welcome banquet was to be held.

◇ ◇ ◇

That evening...

It was still a little early to begin the feast, but eager villagers were already starting to gather at the central square.

Rio had finished cooking with everyone and was visiting the hill outside the village. His purpose was, of course, to pay his respects at his parents’ graves.

Surrounding Rio were the people he had arrived at the village with. Earlier, when he informed Gouki and Kayoko he was going to visit their

graves, the others had expressed their wish to come too. Moving in such a large group attracted attention, but Ruri went with them and told the villagers they passed that she was giving them a quick tour before the feast. Thus, they arrived at the hill without anyone's notice.

Rio was the first to slowly walk up to the stone monument. The others maintained a distance out of consideration for him. When Rio noticed their discretion, his mouth turned up in a faint smile as he proceeded forward.

This place hasn't changed at all...

He looked around at the scenery from the hill. When he looked at the almost setting sun over the village, it felt like no time had passed since the last time he was here.

However, the boy from back then was different compared to who he was now. Something within his heart had definitely changed... Rio himself could feel that keenly.

Mom. Dad. I achieved my goal. I killed Lucius...

Would the two of them rejoice at knowing that? Perhaps they'd be saddened by it. The dead couldn't talk, so there was no way for him to know the answer.

But that was fine. He hadn't decided to pursue vengeance for someone else's approval. He hadn't achieved vengeance for someone else.

Two years ago, Rio had sworn vengeance on this hill for none other than himself.

That's why if something had changed within Rio, it would be that the frozen clock within him had started moving once again. Perhaps not moving at the right speed, but it was slowly and certainly beginning to tick. However...

I probably wouldn't be like this just by getting my revenge, though, Rio thought to himself. And the reason was because he himself hadn't accepted it —the fact he had gotten his revenge, that is. He understood that revenge was an evil deed, and did it anyway... Rio would have continued hating himself like that.

However, he didn't detest himself that much anymore. There were people who claimed they wanted to stay beside someone like him, so he was able to like himself a little. Though he still didn't have much confidence...

I don't want to lose the things important to me. That's why I tried to let go of them. After I tried to do something so selfish, everyone extended their

hands to me. That's why it's my turn to repay them.

On the hill he once swore vengeance at, Rio made a new decision in his heart. He pressed his hands together before the nameless graves of his parents as though to make a vow.

This secret grave was built in memory of the two people who would never return to the Karasuki Kingdom again by the few who were aware of the circumstances. As such, there were no corpses resting here. Not even Rio knew where their bodies were, but he nevertheless still treated this place as their graves, placing his hands together to mourn them.

After a moment, Rio lowered his hands and lifted his face, turning around to head back to the others.

"Thank you very much, everyone." He beamed dazzlingly while facing the sunset, calling out to everyone with a soft voice.

After that, Gouki and Kayoko, Miharu and Celia, then Latifa and the others all took turns paying their respects to Rio's parents. Then, they headed to the feast, where they received an enthusiastically warm welcome from the villagers and partied late into the night.

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Two days after arriving at the Karasuki Kingdom village, Rio was to head for the Karasuki capital with Gouki, Kayoko, Komomo, and Aoi. With Orphia's assistance, that morning, they transported them all to the capital. They landed on a hill by the roadside at the outskirts of the city.

"We'll meet back here in three days at noon."

They made a promise to meet up and bid farewell to Orphia, who returned to the village.

Afterwards, the five of them entered the capital and headed for Gouki's residence first. Part of the reason they didn't go straight to the castle was so that Gouki and the others could visit their home again, but also because Gouki was currently retired and considered missing.

In order to secretly chase after Rio, he and his family had run off without notice. If they suddenly showed up at the castle now, they'd create a fuss and inevitably need to go through a number of formalities; it was a far better plan to catch up with Hayate and have him arrange a meeting with King Homura and Queen Shizuku in secret instead.

Hayate was shocked by the sudden return of his family, but as soon as he understood the circumstances, he set off into action. He returned before noon with an appointment arranged for the next afternoon.

Thus, Hayate brought them to the royal castle as quietly as possible. Rio was shown to the room where he had met the king and queen once before.

"Thank you for making time for me on the day of my sudden arrival, King Homura, Queen Shizuku." Rio sat down on the seat opposite to his grandparents and bowed his head.

"You returned to us—of course I'd adjust our plans to prioritize this. Not to mention you were accompanied by Gouki and Kayoko, who went after you. I couldn't have more important guests than this." Homura looked truly happy to be seeing the memory of his daughter Ayame once again.

"Don't you mean 'we,' not 'I,' dear?" Homura's wife, Shizuku, puffed up her cheeks in a pout. Rio's grandmother was nearly forty years apart in age from him, but her sulking face was awfully cute.

"Ha ha ha. Forgive me." Homura laughed and apologized sincerely.

"I'm so glad we're able to see you again, Rio. You did well returning alive. It's so reassuring seeing you healthy." Shizuku sighed in relief, a soft look in her eyes. Her expression was exactly the same as Ayame's face in Rio's memories.

"Many things have happened since I left Yagumo, but it was all thanks to other people." Rio had a somewhat distant look in his eyes as he nodded with a gentle smile.

"Hayate has informed us of the general situation, but will you tell us the details yourself?" Homura asked.

"Yes. That's what I came to do. I'll start with what happened first."

Rio summarized the events that happened from the moment he departed from Karasuki for revenge until his return to the castle now. He narrowed down the matters to only the minimum facts, completing his report in a matter of minutes. Finally, he ended with conveying his intent to travel together with Gouki's family from now on.

"It seems you've been blessed with all kinds of meetings. Perhaps that's why I thought you had a rather positive expression on your face when I first entered the room." Homura stared at Rio's face and smiled, pleased.

"Oh my, you too? I thought the same," Shizuku agreed happily with her husband.

“Heh heh heh. Everyone who meets Sir Rio says the same thing. I actually thought the same myself,” Gouki said proudly.

“Is it that clearly written on my face?” Rio touched his cheeks with his hand, cocking his head curiously.

“Hmm... It’s not entirely gone, but it’s like the shadow over you has faded a lot. Perhaps it was the manifestation of your strong will...” Homura described the difference in Rio’s expression with tact—he wasn’t the ruler of a kingdom for nothing.

“Maybe it’s because my revenge is done?” Rio wondered shyly.

“Ha ha ha. Indeed, there are those who make bright faces after achieving their revenge. However, such people also tend to have hints of aggression in their expressions, as though putting their legitimacy on display. They don’t have hints of guilt in their expressions like you.”

Because they believed they were in the right, they had bright faces with no sign of guilt. That was Homura’s instant rebuttal—the accurate analysis of a king who had looked at many people before.

“If that’s how my face looks to King Homura right now, then it’s exactly as you say. I believe I was blessed with good meetings,” Rio agreed.

Shizuku looked as happy as if it had happened to her. “You must have wonderful people around you...”

“Yes... Those people stayed close to me, saying they wanted to be with me despite my decision to live for revenge. That’s what made me realize I had gained as many precious things as I had lost.” Rio smiled softly as he expressed the change in his heart.

“The truth is...when you first mentioned pursuing vengeance, I was worried you’d return an empty shell if you succeeded. However, I couldn’t advise you against doing it... But at any rate, it seemed to be a groundless fear.” Homura had a pained expression thinking of that past Rio but relaxed his tensed body at the end.

“I know this may just sound convenient, but now that I’ve accomplished what I set out to do, I want to live without losing what’s important to me.”

For the sake of myself, and most importantly, for the sake of everyone else... Rio’s expression tightened with his resolution.

“I understand. So that’s why you agreed to accept Gouki’s family.”

“Yes...”

“But what do you plan on doing now? Will you remain in Karasuki?”

Homura looked slightly nervous for some reason, watching Rio's expression for any changes.

If... If he chooses to remain in the Karasuki Kingdom...

Perhaps they would be able to provide a quiet life for him, Homura thought, but...

"I'm thinking of returning to the Strahl region again," Rio answered without hesitation.

"I see... Things will get lonely again, then." Homura frowned in disappointment.

"I have to return to Strahl for the sake of those important to me. I'm sorry."

There were Miharu's, Satsuki's, Aki's, and Masato's futures to consider... And there was Celia as well. In which case, he figured he had no choice but to settle in the Strahl region.

"It's nothing to apologize for."

"Thank you... However, while I will spend more time in Strahl, I'd like to increase the frequency of my visits here as well. If it isn't a problem for you, will you allow me to visit you like this again?"

Rio was able to make the trip from Strahl to Yagumo and back in a month. Unless there was some emergency requiring his presence, he could arrange to visit periodically.

"Of course."

"We'd never turn you away."

Homura's and Shizuku's voices overlapped.

"Thank you very much..." Rio relaxed.

"We would've liked to meet the people who changed you and thank them ourselves..." Shizuku sighed in disappointment, being curious about them.

"I'm afraid I can't bring them all to this castle. Their numbers would attract attention."

It would be a little too suspicious if a crowd of strangers showed up at the castle to visit the king and queen. While the black-haired Miharu could pass for a Yagumo resident, Celia, Aishia, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, and Alma all had different facial features to those of the locals. Although the spirit folk girls currently had their racial traits concealed via artifacts and could similarly change their hair color if they wished, they'd still be suspected of being foreign.

“It’ll be difficult meeting them within the castle, but if it were outside of the castle...” Homura pondered with a hum. He then turned to Rio to ask, “Incidentally, how long do you intend on staying at Lady Yuba’s village for?”

“Around two weeks, I’d say...” Rio’s eyes widened at the implied possibility of meeting outside the castle. There were strict restrictions for when the king and queen could go out, but...

“If it’s for a very brief period of time, then it’s not impossible. We may need to ask Lady Orphia for her help, though...” Gouki grinned and looked at Rio.

“Is that the truth?” Homura asked.

“Tell us more, Gouki,” Shizuku added.

“It’s possible to conceal your whereabouts for a few hours, right? You just need to finish your rendezvous within that time. Isn’t that right, Sir Rio?” Gouki said with a wicked grin. With his knowledge of Ariel, that was enough for Rio to understand Gouki’s idea.

“I’m willing to give it a try, but is it okay for Your Majesties to sneak out of the castle?” Rio asked, considering the risks.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there. If it’s a matter of a few hours, I can make up a lie. If something does happen, I’ll take responsibility as the king. So, how do we slip out of the castle?”

Homura declared his resolve, eyes sparkling with regained youth. He must have really wanted to meet the people precious to Rio, as he was brimming with eagerness.

“Oh my, it reminds me of when Ayame used to sneak out of the castle to visit Zen’s village. I never thought I’d be able to do the same.” Shizuku was on board as well.

Thus, the operation for the secret visit pressed ahead under the leadership of the king and queen themselves. They arrived at the village three days later with Orphia’s help, surprising Yuba and everyone else.

Interlude: Letter to the Centostella Kingdom

In the Centostella Kingdom, a few days after Rio and the others arrived in Yagumo...

Takahisa was holed up in his room as usual while Masato swung his sword around in the training area.. First Princess Lilianna's knight, Hilda, was sparring with Masato that afternoon, teaching him how to refine his swordcraft. Aki was watching them practice from a distance.

While he still had a long way to go to catch up to Hilda, the career soldier and captain-ranked knight, Masato was improving every day. He was able to cross swords at a high level.

Over ten minutes had passed since they began sparring. Their matches didn't end with a decisive exchange, continuing on endlessly by the participants resetting their positions. This meant they were panting rather heavily, out of breath.

"Breaks are important too. Let's rest for a moment, Sir Masato." Hilda halted in her movements, catching her breath. Masato stopped as well.

"Yes, Instructor Hilda," Masato replied cheerfully, gasping for breath. He lowered his wooden training sword and wiped his sweat with a sigh.

"Your efforts are paying off today too."

Lilianna, who had just arrived at the arena a short moment ago, approached the two. The reason why Hilda had called for the break was because she had seen her.

"Here you go, Sir Masato. Have a drink too." Lilianna's attendant, Frill, offered Masato a towel and drink.

"Oh, thank you, Frill... Phew, that hits the spot!" Masato thanked her warmly and drank. During that time, Aki also made her way over, quietly.

"Sir Masato, a letter arrived from the Galarc Kingdom." Lilianna handed Masato a letter.

"Wait, really?! It must be from Satsuki." Masato opened the letter happily.

The sender was Satsuki, but Rio and Miharu also wrote messages whenever they were in Galarc. Masato cast his eyes over the letter in excitement while Aki stared at it in curiosity.

The letter reported on the recent situation of Satsuki and Rio. Rio had departed on another journey with the others, so this time the letter was written by Satsuki alone. She wrote about how they had fun living together in the mansion Rio received on the Galarc Castle grounds, about the bathtub there, and about the sleepover they had. There was also a message Rio and Miharu wanted to pass on to them. Finally, she wondered how Masato and Aki were doing.

"Huh, so Celia also went to that village... I wonder if Arslan's doing well," Masato mumbled to himself fondly as he read the letter. Once he reached the end, he noticed Aki's gaze and offered her the letter.

"Here, you read it too. You're curious, right?"

"You sure...?" Aki asked hesitantly. She figured the contents were directed at Masato alone. After what she and Takahisa did at the banquet, Miharu and Satsuki only kept in touch with Masato.

"I'm saying it's fine, so it's fine. They're worried about you as well, you know?"

Go on, Masato urged with a wave of the letter.

"But..." Aki lifted her arm hesitantly, then immediately lowered it again.

"What's wrong? Don't you care about Miharu and Satsuki? There's stuff written about Haruto too," Masato encouraged.

"But after what I did..."

Aki was probably recalling what she had done to Miharu and Rio at Galarc as guilt plagued her expression. She didn't have the right to read that letter, she thought.

"You've really reflected on it after all..."

"..." Aki ducked her head in silence. Ever since she came to Centostella, not a day had passed without her remembering what happened in Galarc. And every time she did, she was filled with gloom. Those feelings intensified every day.

But was that really a form of reflection? Aki didn't have the confidence to say so. That's why she couldn't agree or disagree with Masato's view.

"I wouldn't show our brother this letter, but I think I can show you. So read it."

“Why...?” Aki asked fearfully.

“Unlike Takahisa, you’ve actually reflected on it, and you regret what you did, right?”

“...” Masato kept saying words like ‘reflection’ and ‘regret,’ but Aki couldn’t agree with them. She remained silent—it was easy to call it reflection and regret, but so what? They were words that were only said when seeking forgiveness. Words used when seeking forgiveness, even though she was the one who was wrong.

Wasn’t that too convenient? She had done such a terrible thing... Wouldn’t it be too convenient to seek forgiveness after that? That was the question that filled Aki’s head.

That being said, she wasn’t so sure anymore. She definitely felt sorry for Miharu. She felt conflicted about Haruto, but she also felt guilty for that. She could accept that she had done something wrong.

But when she thought about Takahisa, she was also filled with a helpless emotion that she couldn’t put into words...

Aki really had no idea anymore. Her mind was all over the place. She wanted Miharu to conveniently appear and save her. And that in turn spurred on her guilty conscience further... She just couldn’t say she was reflecting on or regretting things.

Then, Lilianna looked at Aki.

Lady Aki has reflected on things and regretted them, which is causing her so much pain right now. In contrast, Sir Takahisa is...

She thought of Takahisa, who wasn’t present right now.

What’s done was done and would remain as a fact—there was no erasing that. That’s why Aki continued to suffer over it.

Takahisa was in similar pain, but he had shut himself in his room and refused to interact with anyone. When Lilianna compared the two, she just couldn’t see him suffering in the same way as Aki.

Time is needed to take a proper look at yourself. That’s what I believed, but...

Was that really the right thing to do? There was no telling if Takahisa reflected on what he did in Galarc and regretted it. Lilianna was starting to lose confidence.

“Well, whatever... I’ll leave this letter with you, Aki. You can decide when to read it for yourself. Here.”

Masato ran out of patience for the silent Aki and placed the letter in her hand.

“But...” Aki reflexively tried to push it back.

“Stop thinking so hard. You can just read it when you want to. How about you write what you’re feeling in a letter to Miharu? That’s another reason why I’d like you to read the letter, actually. I’ll give you the other letters as well.” Masato pushed the letter back firmly.

“...” Even after hearing that, Aki couldn’t read the letter right away. However, she didn’t try to return it to Masato anymore, and instead hugged it to her chest dearly.

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Chapter 5: The Saint's Development

Some time passed, and soon it became time for Rio and the others to depart from the Karasuki Kingdom for the Strahl region once more.

Far away in the Strahl region, five people were walking through the Galarc Kingdom's trade capital of Amande, home to the headquarters of the Ricca Guild. They were all dressed in travel clothes; one of them was Saint Erica, who had visited the Proxia Castle by herself just the other day.

"This is Amande. A rather bustling city, it seems."

Erica looked around at the cityscape, impressed by what she saw. The expressions of the people she passed were all energetic and lively, and the many patrolling soldiers meant the public order in the city was good too. Either the streets were well maintained or the residents were highly conscious of appearances, as there was no rubbish on the streets or strange smells coming from the alleyways, making the city appear quite beautiful.

"The faces of the people are bright, though not as much as those of our nation. The rumored noble lady governing this city must be quite good at her job, Lady Erica," the female swordsman accompanying Erica said to her. The others around them also gave their approval for Amande in pleasant surprise.

However, none of them were willing to back down from their stance of their newly established motherland being better. Part of the reason was because of their pride, but the biggest reason was because they worshipped Erica as their saint. As people who were guided by Saint Erica, their lives were naturally better—this was something they believed without any doubt.

The four accompanying Erica were voluntary followers, here to protect her as an elite guard. Among them were those who were born as nobility, people who had served the original kingdom that Erica destroyed, religiously converted after being guided by Erica's numerous miracles and teachings.

"I don't doubt that our people are living better either. However, this isn't just the work of good governing. We've traveled through many cities, but has there ever been one this developed? We should refer to this city for the development of our own nation, don't you think?" Erica said, correcting the

mistake her followers had made.

“Indeed...”

“If we could reproduce this splendid city in our own nation...”

“We should speak to the person who developed this city.”

The followers didn’t deny it. They always believed the words of the saint were true, and everything they said was always based on this premise.

Erica ignored them.

The standard of this city is far above the average of a Strahl city. There’s no way it could have developed this much without someone’s guidance. The only thing I thought was worth using was the Ricca Guild and the title of its head, but... Liselotte Cretia, huh? My interest has been piqued.

She found herself having a personal interest in Liselotte, the governor of Amande and president of the Ricca Guild. Her mouth twisted.

“Hey, you pretty adventurer ladies...and the pretty black-haired lady over there!”

A stall owner called out to Erica’s party. Their travel clothes seemed to have made him assume they were adventurers.

“...Me?” Erica pointed to herself. Black-haired people were extremely rare in the Strahl region. Her attention caught by the word “black-haired,” Erica looked around the area for anyone else fitting that criteria, but there was only herself. Figuring the man was just selling his stall product, Erica looked away again in disinterest.

“How about some of Amande’s famous soup pasta?”

“Pasta, you say...? The product you’re selling is... Hmm.” Erica seemed to think something after hearing the stall owner pronounce “pasta” and looked over at the ingredients behind the counter. Her eyes widened when she spotted the rod-shaped dried noodles and she immediately paused to think.

“I sell soup pasta here. Ha ha, I bet this is your first time seeing pasta!”

“That’s not the case, but... Pasta, hmm. If you don’t mind, could you show me the way you say that more clearly?”

Erica’s attention was still focused on the sound of the word “pasta.” She fixed her gaze on the man’s lips to confirm the word he was saying.

“S-Sure? P-Pasta?” Under her observant gaze, the stall owner repeated the product name in confusion.

“And just to confirm, this is how you say pasta...?”

Erica kept the dried noodles in the stall within her view while staring at

the man's mouth and confirming the fact once again.

"Y-Yeah. What's the big deal? You're pretty, but you're a weird one, miss." The man's confusion only increased with the repeated questions and Erica's fixed gaze on his mouth.

"Pardon my rudeness... I was just a little curious. May I have one order of soup pasta? It's just about lunchtime, so we may as well eat here. Please make a serving for all of us." Erica smiled warmly to ease the man's caution.

"S-Sure. Coming right up!" The man nodded, slightly startled.

"May I watch you make it as well?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

"Thank you very much." Erica walked past the stall counter and stared at all the cooking utensils from beside the stall owner. She then fixed her gaze on the dried noodles once more.

"By the way, you called this Amande's 'famous pasta' earlier. Who was the one who invented this?" she asked the owner.

"Hmm? Oh, this ingredient was invented by the Amande governor and Ricca Guild president, Lady Liselotte Cretia. It started selling in Amande several years ago, and now it's a staple food as common as bread in this city. The neighboring kingdoms have started to use this ingredient more as well," the stall owner answered proudly.

"I see. Only a few years ago, huh..."

"What's wrong? You seem oddly pleased." The stall owner's eyes widened slightly, peering at Erica's face.

"Nothing. I'm just glad I made the trip to this city. Thanks to that, I'm about to be blessed by a very good meeting," Erica said, the corners of her mouth rising in a grin.

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Roughly one hour later, inside an office at the Amande governor building...

"Say, Aria... Isn't there a strangely large amount of paperwork today?" Liselotte had just finished her lunch and sat down in her office to do work, when her expression twitched at the mountain of paperwork on her desk.

"They're documents for the beginning of the mass production of the soap products Sir Amakawa designed. We're halting the production of the Guild's

current soap products and expanding operations, so the documents mounted up," Aria answered smoothly, having skimmed the paperwork in advance. They were discarding the old production line and starting over from scratch, so everything from the continued employment of the old workers to the cost calculations of the new hires had to be checked.

"Ah, I see. I don't know whether to be happy or sad..." Liselotte chuckled with a strained smile. Because she was hesitant before the stack of papers, she was having trouble getting started.

"Give up and begin your work already."

"I-I know..." At Aria's sigh, Liselotte pouted cutely. She normally acted maturely, so it wasn't a gesture she would show before others, but when she was in front of Aria she showed girlish expressions appropriate for her age.

"Let's clean this up." With that said, Liselotte finally reached for the mountain of papers. It was at that moment when someone knocked on the door.

"Come in." Liselotte looked at the door and gave her permission for whomever it was to enter. It was the newest attendant-in-training, Chloe.

"A visitor has arrived without an appointment, saying she wants to visit the head of the Ricca Guild. She's at the gate of the noble district right now, and...I've never heard of her before, but she says she's Saint Erica."

There were quite a few great figures throughout history referred to as saints, but when it came to those alive in the modern day, that number reduced significantly. If an unknown person was a self-proclaimed saint, it was almost guaranteed to be a lie.

Chloe had been ordered by Liselotte to always report any visitors who arrived, but the words, "There's a suspicious lady out here calling herself a saint. What will you do?" were written on her face in invisible ink. Meanwhile...

"Saint Erica... Isn't that..."

"It's the name of the person who incited the people of a small vassal nation of the Proxia Empire into revolution not too long ago, I believe."

Liselotte and Aria recognized the name.

"Could it be the same person? If so, does she want the Galarc Kingdom on her side after making an enemy of the Proxia Empire? But then why would she come to Amande instead of the capital...?" Liselotte cocked her head, considering the possibilities.

“It could be someone else who’s mistaken the Ricca Guild for a charity,” Aria said. In fact, that was the more likely possibility.

“Hmm, but doesn’t it make you a little curious?” Liselotte said, placing the paper in her hand back on top of the pile on her desk.

“Even if you escape reality, the work isn’t going anywhere...”

“Th-This is work too. Yes, work. Information gathering! Information is the lifeline of both merchants and nobles! Better to see this for myself than listen to hearsay!” Liselotte said, as though to convince herself, then stood up.

“Treat her the same as any first-time visitor and show her to the estate, Chloe,” she directed.

“Understood.” Chloe bowed once and left the room.

“As usual, you’ll be present with me. Treat it as an extended lunch.”

“As you wish.” Aria nodded in resignation with a smile on her face.

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And so, roughly half an hour later...

With Aria as her guard, Liselotte stepped inside the meeting room of the Amande governor’s building. Seated on the sofa inside the room was Erica.

When Liselotte entered the room and first spotted her, she froze for a moment to swallow her breath.

She’s Japanese, right...? No matter how you look at it...

Erica’s facial features were clearly that of a Japanese person. She wore a dress that would definitely be dismissed as cosplay in Japan. It was a normal design for those in holy positions in this world, but it had quite an impact on Liselotte, who had memories of her life in Japan... Especially since it was coming from a self-proclaimed saint.

So this is the saint who destroyed a kingdom... The sixth hero? There’s been no information on her until now... It was the right decision to meet her.

Since she was going out of her way to make contact, there must have been something she wanted to discuss with Liselotte. Perhaps she’d be able to get some useful information out of her as well. It was because these things could happen that she didn’t ignore visitors with no appointments. That was Liselotte’s way of doing things.

“Is something the matter? You took a look at my face and seemed

surprised... You are Liselotte, right?"

Erica stood up quietly when Liselotte entered and bowed in a polite manner. She gazed at Liselotte's face with a giggle and asked what was wrong.

"No, it's nothing... You must be Saint Erica. As you said, I am the president of the Ricca Guild, Liselotte Cretia. I'm also the governor of this city."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Erica. I was worried my title of saint would sound too shady for you to meet me, so I'm pleased to be able to meet you," Erica said, joking about how she thought her own title was suspicious as well.

"I've actually heard your name before, so I wanted to meet you myself. Please have a seat," Liselotte said, sitting herself down across from Erica.

"Why, really? You've heard of me?" Erica had a fake smile of delight on her face as she sat down.

"I heard a rumor on the wind not long ago. A revolt occurred in a small kingdom, giving birth to a new developing nation. The person who led the people at the time was called Saint Erica, I believe."

That's you, isn't it? Liselotte stared at Erica as though to imply that.

"Oh my, is that so? I'm surprised information travels so fast in a world like this. Yes, I am Erica."

"I see..."

She confessed to the truth so easily, Liselotte was thrown off balance for a moment. The kingdom that fell was an unimportant minor nation located at the remote frontier, so it hadn't attracted much attention. But she hadn't expected Erica to acknowledge that she led a nation into ruin so easily. Admitting to it could result in her being considered a security risk.

"Were you on your guard because you thought I was the one who led a kingdom to destruction?" Erica asked jokingly, having seen through Liselotte.

Liselotte answered after a brief pause. "If I judged things by only focusing on the negatives of the results, that would be the case. However, there are reasons behind everything that happens. I won't be able to give a proper evaluation without considering both the process and the results."

"Oh my, what a wonderful view you have." Erica giggled elegantly.

"Not at all... So why did you want to meet me today?"

"You have an interest in me, I see. That makes me very happy. And the

same goes for me as well. I gained an interest in the Ricca Guild that gained so much fame in our nation, and in you personally. I came here because I wanted to meet you."

"So you came to see me out of curiosity?" Liselotte asked indirectly if she was just here to meet her, and not for any other goal.

"Meeting you isn't my only goal, of course. I wanted to scout you."

"Scout me?" Liselotte looked confused at the unexpected answer.

"Yes. I would love for you to move to our nation and lend your strength in developing it. Just like how you did for Amande here," Erica said, starting a completely erratic topic.

Liselotte was the daughter of Count Cretia, the leading noble of the Galarc Kingdom, and she was also the president of the Ricca Guild. Asking her to move to a remote unknown nation would normally be unthinkable. In fact, it was so preposterous, her invitation sounded like a joke... But Erica didn't seem to be joking.

"I am a noble of the Galarc Kingdom. I cannot do such a thing," Liselotte said with a serious look.

"Oh dear. What do I have to do for you to accept, then?" Erica didn't seem to be aware of how ridiculous her request was; her questions were worded under the assumption Liselotte could be convinced.

It's hard to tell how serious she is... At a glance, she has a well-mannered smile, but...

It felt like she was talking to someone wearing a mask. Being invited to something so tremendous immediately after meeting left Liselotte feeling wary towards Erica.

"It would be one thing to temporarily visit kingdoms we have friendly relations with, but did you think a noble would be able to accept an invitation from an unknown nation so easily? Asking me to migrate is equal to asking me to abandon my country. At worst, it would be seen as inciting a fight with my motherland," Liselotte said, emphasizing her strong disapproval of the situation. Erica's invitation was asking her to betray her homeland.

It was at this moment that Erica finally frowned. "So the obstacle is your country, you're saying. You're a noble of the Galarc Kingdom, so you can't move to another."

"Even if I weren't a noble, I cannot think of a reason to move to your nation. I love this country, and I'm proud of this city that I govern."

“I see. However, royalty and nobility govern over the people as the privileged class. Don’t you think this could create a chain of misfortune?”

“What are you suddenly talking about now...?” Erica’s question was a little too risky to take as dark humor, so Liselotte questioned her with a searching expression.

“I’m saying royalty and nobility only stand in the way of the development of the world.”

“I am part of the royalty and noble class too...”

Liselotte frowned at being told such things to her face. She was on the verge of feeling fed up with this conversation.

“However, when you move to our nation, you’ll discard your rank as nobility. Since we have no royalty or nobility in our country,” Erica said, as though the conclusion was set already. Liselotte had lots of experience talking to people who had their own conclusion decided with no intention of listening, but Erica surpassed them all by far.

“And I’m saying I have no intention of migrating...”

The conversation wasn’t meshing well, causing Liselotte to add more emotion behind her tone as she denied Erica.

A clattering sound went off in the room; the source was immediately behind Liselotte, coming from Aria. She had dropped her writing pen.

“Excuse me.” Aria bowed with just those words, but she wasn’t the head attendant for nothing. She had made an unexpected sound on purpose, getting her master to reset her thoughts. Sensing that, Liselotte let out a small sigh and thanked Aria in her heart.

Thanks, Aria.

“You were saying royalty and nobility only harm the development of the world, right?”

She tried to correct the trajectory of the topic. The conversation was scattered all over the place, so she focused on one aspect of it.

“The privileged class bled the people of my small nation dry for many, many years. Do you know the reason why?” Erica asked again.

“They weren’t blessed with good rulers, I suppose...”

She wasn’t wrong. But Liselotte frowned anyway, believing there was no perfect answer.

Meanwhile...

“You seem to have an understanding. If I were to reword it more

thoroughly, it would be because a status-based monarchy is an extremely imperfect social system."

Erica smiled in satisfaction, delving deeper into Liselotte's answer with her words.

"You must face it—the fact that accepting the framework of a privileged class creates a system where they get to line their pockets more. As long as the ruling class is given free rein, the citizens must entrust the stability of their lives to the good will of the rulers. As a result, a world where the people are continuously exploited is created. This is a common problem in many of the kingdoms of this world. Wouldn't you agree?"

She raised a question to Liselotte that tested her loyalty as nobility. If Liselotte replied that it wasn't a problem, her words would be perceived as the royalty and nobility class being unwilling to lose their privilege and have equality with the common class.

If she had asked Nidoll Proxia the same question, he might have responded that he didn't have a problem with it.

"Even if that were true, it's not something I can fix," Liselotte said.

"Isn't that because you refuse to throw away your privilege as a noble? You wish to use the people as a stepping-stone for sweet benefits. Am I wrong?"

"I won't deny that I was raised in a blessed environment. But that doesn't mean I will step on the citizens to exploit them. I govern Amande with the people in mind, aiming to create equality as much as possible."

"Indeed, Amande is a lovely city. The people are brimming with life. But that is only because you're governing this city. What if someone else took over the rule of this city in the future, causing the life of the people to deteriorate? Don't you think we should create a system to prevent such a thing?" Erica asked question after question, all of which were made to sound just. Any royalty or nobility with virtuous values would have trouble answering them.

"Even if I did, that would be difficult. Like I said, it's not something I can fix." Liselotte answered with a look of pained endurance.

Erica tilted her head curiously. "Why do you think it's difficult? It's easy. We just have to give the decision-making right of the city to the people in a council form. Are you saying you can't do that?"

"It isn't that simple at all. If you wanted to do that, you'd need to develop

the education of the people first. When the people involved in political decision-making are unreliable, the group will self-destruct. Alternatively, those in the know will take advantage of that foolishness to bend politics to their own convenience. That will just give birth to a new privileged class. There are issues in forcing democracy onto the people from above, so even if education develops, such obstacles will never be completely removed." Liselotte listed the issues with the matter Erica called simple, giving a logical rebuttal.

"You really are intelligent. You understand that people are actually beasts at heart. And the fact that will never change no matter how much society advances. You understand it perfectly. How wonderful. Yes, that's why I..." Erica's eyes widened faintly. Something seemed to stab her in the heart, as the smiling mask she had on until now slipped, showing a painful expression underneath. She grit her teeth as though she were holding back a strong grudge towards something. That was the first humanlike expression Liselotte saw from her.

"What are you saying...?" Liselotte looked at Erica questioningly.

"Pardon me. The thought of someone as intelligent as you not being in our nation got me all heated up." Erica pasted her smiling mask on her face once again. The mask of a saint...

"I think I understand how you led your people and created a nation based on our conversation just now," Liselotte summarized with a sigh.

"Oh? Isn't that impressive. Would you be willing to share that with me?" Erica asked with widened eyes.

"It's because you think of the people, isn't it?" Liselotte replied.

"Heh. Heh heh heh. Ha ha ha." Erica laughed loudly.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing. I merely wish to create a world where the weak don't exist. As a start, I created a democratic nation for the people, by the people... To put it in another way, it's my grand plan for revenge."

"Revenge, you say..."

"Yes. That's why creating a world where the weak don't exist is simply a means. My goal is revenge."

"I'm not sure I follow what you're saying..." Just as she thought they could have an intelligent conversation, this happened. Liselotte had a tired look on her face.

“Our chat has been extremely meaningful. That’s why I’d like to invite you one more time. Liselotte Cretia, please throw away your status and come to my nation...to create a country where everyone is equal.”

“I refuse... I’m sure a country where everyone is equal would be wonderful. But creating such a place is impossible. You criticize the rule of royalty and nobility, saying the people should be the ones to govern the country, but there are a mountain of issues that have to be addressed for that to work. I believe the current system is better in comparison. If things need to change, then that change will happen slowly. In my opinion, inciting the people into a sudden revolution is not the right move.”

That would only lead to destruction. Liselotte gave her opinion on the subject fluently.

“You’re rejecting me no matter what?”

“Yes. In fact, I don’t get it. Why are you so fixated on me as an individual...?” Liselotte said, showing a glimpse of her confusion.

“To be honest, I originally had my eye on the Ricca Guild’s influence. However, when I heard the names of the products, I started holding an interest in the person behind them. I originally believed an advisor was the one inventing the products, but after speaking to you, I’ve figured it out. It’s you, isn’t it? The one creating products using words from Earth,” Erica said, staring at Liselotte.

Liselotte cocked her head curiously. “What do you mean...?”

“You don’t need to act ignorant. No, let’s see. Don’t play dumb with me. My name’s Sakuraba Erika, but you... Is your name maybe Rikka? You look like a young girl in your teens, but how old are you on the inside? Do you get what I’m saying?” Erica suddenly dropped her polite, saintlike tone of speech and started speaking with familiarity, like a regular young woman her age.

“You really change the subject so suddenly. You’ve changed your tone now too. Is that your true way of speaking?” Liselotte asked in shock, eyes widened.

“I’d prefer you answer my question first. From now on, I’m not Saint Erica speaking, but Sakuraba Erika. Only if you don’t mind your maid listening in, that is.” Erica looked at Aria, who was standing behind Liselotte.

“I understand... In that case, I’m the one behind the Ricca Guild’s products. It’s fine if Aria remains here.”

After the first time, when Rio brought Miharu to her, she explained her

previous life to Aria alone.

"Hmm. So, what's your name and age? Are you Mrs. Rikka? Or Miss Rikka?"

"I've answered one question, so please answer my question next." If Erica was going to say whatever she wanted, Liselotte had no reason to hold back any further.

"So the rule is for us to answer one question each. Fine. What did you wanna ask? Ah, my manner of speech, was it? This is my true self—no, this *was* my true self," Erica said, answering Liselotte's earlier question.

"Was?"

"It's my turn next. What was your name in your past life?"

"Minamoto Rikka. What do you mean by 'was' your true self?"

"Sakuraba Erika is as good as dead... Right now I'm Saint Erica." A shadow crossed Erica's face for a moment, but she immediately covered it up with a smile.

"As good as dead?"

"My turn to ask. How old were you in your past life?"

"Sixteen."

"Oh my, that's rather young. I thought you were around the age of a university student, but you might just be older than me if you added up your total age. You still look like a child, so it's pretty hard to believe."

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“Enough about my age. What did you mean by ‘good as dead’?” Liselotte asked next, not wanting to engage in idle chatter.

“Because I can no longer see my dearest lover anymore. He was everything to me. I have no intention of marrying anyone else, so I no longer feel any need to be Sakuraba Erika anymore. That’s why I became Saint Erica. However, talking to you has brought back some of those fond memories.”

It’s like I’ve returned just for this moment, Erica thought a little sadly.

“What should I ask next? Let’s see... Where did you live in Japan?”

“Bunkyo, Tokyo.”

“Ah ha ha. Seeing you say that with that face is funny. You lived in a good area, though. I was a lecturer at a university in Shinjuku, by the way.”

“Why did you assume I was reincarnated?”

“You’re talking to someone who was summoned to another world. I just figured it wouldn’t be a stretch for there to be reincarnated people as well. I read some light novels on the topic when I was in Japan too. So how did you die, Rikka?”

“...It was a bus accident,” Liselotte answered with a slightly unhappy look. Erica kept asking her questions that didn’t matter.

“Wow, how cliché.”

“It’s my turn next. Why are you asking such trivial things? I expected you to ask something more meaningful.”

“No reason in particular... I just didn’t want to ask Saint Erica’s questions as Sakuraba Erika. I said I was feeling nostalgic talking to you, didn’t I?” Erica’s smile turned strained for a moment, as though she had remembered some harsh reality.

“I see...”

Liselotte still wasn’t convinced. Her personality was so different to when she was a saint, it felt like she was talking to someone else.

“But you’re right. None of that matters. Let’s make the next question the last one.”

“All right.” There were still many things Liselotte wanted to ask, but she couldn’t force her to answer.

“Then I’ll go first.”

“Sure...” Liselotte braced herself for whatever question would come, but...

“Rikka—no, Liselotte. Do you have someone you love?”

"...Excuse me?" The question was so unexpected, she wasn't sure she heard it right.

"Are you in love with anyone?"

"Is that something you need to know?"

"Yes. It's standard girl gossip, isn't it?"

"...I do not."

"That's a lie. You paused. Now, that won't do... You have to answer honestly. Otherwise, I won't answer your next question honestly either," Erica said harshly.

"Honestly, I'm not sure. I'm too busy with work," Liselotte answered somewhat shyly, eyes downcast.

"That reaction tells me there's someone you're interested in."

"There's someone who came to mind when you first asked, but...I cannot imagine us becoming lovers."

"I see... But if there is someone, don't do anything you'd regret. This is advice from a regretful past situation."

"Okay..."

"Now it's your turn, Liselotte."

"Right." Liselotte nodded, the question she wanted to ask already prepared. "Then...are you a hero? I only know of five heroes, as there's been no information on the sixth..." Liselotte wondered.

"Hmm... You're gonna ask that?" Erica seemed reluctant for some reason.

"Is there something wrong with that? I answered your question honestly, so you should answer mine too." Liselotte suspected Erica was a hero already, but she wanted Erica to confirm it so it could be established as a fact.

"I don't know if I should. You might be upset."

"But I won't know that until I hear the answer."

"That's true... Then I'll answer. I'm a hero."

Liselotte hummed at the satisfactory answer. "I see, so you really are one... But what's so upsetting about that...?"

"Ah, how troubling indeed. I still need to keep the fact I'm a hero a secret, you see." Erica suddenly started speaking in her saintlike tone.

"...Huh?" The sudden change left Liselotte taken aback.

"Oh!" Immediately after, Erica tried to grab at Liselotte. Before she knew it, Erica was right in front of her, leaving Liselotte in a state of shock.

"What do you think you're doing?" Aria stood in front of Erica, grabbing

her arm. She then proceeded to deftly hurl Erica's body at the window; with a loud crash, the saint flew through the glass and fell to the ground.

"Wha..." Liselotte was left speechless at the sight.

"I shall apprehend her. The other attendant guards should be here soon. Stay over here, Lady Liselotte."

With that, Aria drew the enchanted sword by her side and jumped out the window after Erica.

"Ah, how troubling. How troubling indeed." Meanwhile, Erica was patting the dust off her dress without a single scratch on her.

That saint is a hero. Like Lady Satsuki, her Divine Arms strengthened her body and made her tougher. Killing a hero will only create a fuss... This is a problem... Aria sighed in annoyance.

"You're not a normal attendant, are you?" Erica summoned her Divine Arms—a bishop's staff—into her right hand as she questioned Aria.

"Of course not. None of Lady Liselotte's attendants are normal attendants."

"Heh. Heh heh heh. That's lovely."

No sooner had she said that than Erica charged at Aria. The powerful enhancement of her Divine Arms caused her speed to far surpass the limits of a normal human.

However, Aria's physical body was also enhanced through her enchanted sword. She was able to react to Erica's speed without a problem and close the distance between the saint and herself.

"Oh..." Erica's eyes widened slightly in surprise. Whether it was to avoid a collision or increase the distance between them, she immediately moved to the right in a dramatic way.

But Aria soon closed that distance again, swinging her sword the moment she came within reach. She couldn't afford to kill the hero, so she used the blunt side of her sword to strike. Erica raised her staff at the last minute to block that attack.

"Such wonderful strength indeed," she murmured in awe, thrusting the staff forward to send Aria flying back.

Wh-What tremendous strength...

Aria's body fell back heavily; she had lost in strength despite her enchanted sword's power. Erica's movement speed was still manageable, but her physical strength was on another level.

“It seems like your reinforcements are on their way. I should stop dawdling and clean this up quickly,” Erica said, switching to go on the offensive.

Using the reach of her staff, she inflicted her strikes on Aria from outside the reach of the sword.

The sixth hero seems to have a rather violent disposition.

Aria sometimes saw through the attacks and evaded them, and sometimes swung her sword to parry the staff off course, trying to close the gap to Erica. However, before Aria could come close, Erica thrust her staff into the ground with all her might. Immediately after, the ground rose up and formed a dirt wall, blocking Aria’s way.

“...”

Instead of pursuing her further, Aria retreated. She considered the possibility of Erica going after Liselotte and made sure to have the mansion to her back.

Soon after, the dirt wall Erica created blew up. Erica herself had swung her staff and mowed it down in annoyance. She faced Aria once again.

“You really are strong... I haven’t met anyone this strong before. It sure is a big world...” Erica spat out her words in great admiration.

“Your quick strength is superb, but it doesn’t seem like you’ve had combat training before.”

“Yes, you would be right.”

“Now that I have a grasp of your strength, I’m going to finish this now.”

“Hee hee hee. Who truly knows about that...” Erica dismissed Aria’s provocation with a smug laugh, then ran towards her, swinging her staff once more. The ground was scraped from left to right, sending a dusty shockwave towards Aria.

However, Aria instantly saw through the reach of the shockwave and retreated to a point where the shockwave was weakened. But the moment the shockwave eased, she made a rapid approach towards Erica.

“Uh!”

Erica’s reaction was delayed by her own dust cloud for a brief moment. She quickly tried to blow Aria away with another shockwave, raising her staff, but...

Too slow.

Aria sliced her sword at Erica’s staff before it could swing down,

knocking it upwards. She then slipped right up to Erica and landed a heavy blow to her chest with the palm of her hand.

"Guh..."

It was one of the martial arts techniques she had learned from Rio at the Galarc Castle the other day. Erica's body went flying through the air, sending her rolling ten meters away.

It definitely should have had an impact. Even with an enhanced body, she would've taken a considerable amount of damage. In reality, Erica was shaking on all fours, still conscious but seemingly unable to get up.

It's over. The problem is how to restrain her... Perhaps I should land one more strike to knock her unconscious.

Though it was difficult, there was no helping it. The moment Aria reached a decision, she approached Erica and aimed a kick from below at her stomach.

"Gah...!"

Erica's body jerked up, and several seconds later, gravity sent her falling back. This time, Erica seemed to lose consciousness, collapsing facedown without a twitch.

"Aria!"

At that moment, Natalie and Cosette came running out of the mansion. In their hands was a set of magic-sealing cuffs.

Thank goodness they're so capable. If she's restrained with those cuffs on, she should calm down a little.

Aria approached the facedown Erica. She leaned her weight on Erica's back, pressing her into the ground.

"I'll hold her down while you two put the cuffs... What?!"

Erica had flung Aria off her back with a sharp push-up. The momentum sent Aria flying ten meters or more.

No way. She didn't receive any damage at all?!

Seeing Erica on her feet and full of life below her left Aria speechless. Erica casually looked upwards, met Aria's eyes, and grinned eerily, then dashed at full speed away from her, towards the mansion.

"Cosette! Natalie! Stop that woman!" Aria was still falling through the air and gave her colleagues a quick order.

"Wha?!"

Before Cosette and Natalie could approach Erica, she had swung her

bishop's staff down towards the ground. The shockwave created was nothing like the one earlier—it was almost like a huge explosion had gone off, rumbling like thunder and sending a cloud of dust everywhere. Aria was unable to see the ground as she continued to fall.

Lady Liselotte...

She turned her gaze away from the dust cloud and towards the mansion. She could see Liselotte watching everything out of the second-floor window, and Erica running towards the mansion. Erica was looking around as though she were searching for Liselotte.

No... Hurry. Hurry and fall quicker.

The span of mere seconds felt like an eternity to Aria. When she finally reached the ground, she started running towards the mansion with all her might.

She couldn't see anything past a meter ahead of her, but there was no time to be bothered by that. Praying that the guards would buy her enough time, Aria ran through the dust at full speed. Eventually, her vision cleared.

"Aria, no! Stay back!"

Liselotte's familiar voice could be heard. At the same time, she spotted Erica waiting for her just a few meters away with her staff ready to swing down.

"There you are."

Erica spotted Liselotte leaning out of the second-floor window to yell and grinned. At the same time, she finished swinging her staff down.

"Guh..."

And Aria's vision was blacked out by the shockwave and dirt.

Chapter 6: The Saint's Attack

Two weeks had passed since Liselotte had her conversation with Saint Erica.

After visiting the spirit folk village and Karasuki Kingdom, Rio had returned to the Strahl region once more. However, the only ones with him were the group who originally set off with him—that is, Miharu, Celia, Aishia, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, and Alma. Gouki, Kayoko, Komomo, and the others were not present. Their family had over ten people, which was too many for Ariel to carry.

That was when the idea of teleporting to the Strahl region was brought up. It was a two-week journey by air, so transporting everyone was possible if they split into two groups, but the elders thankfully offered to arrange the production of a teleportation crystal.

Thus, Gouki's group was temporarily staying in the spirit folk village. Rio and the others would go to the Galarc Kingdom first, set up a teleportation point, then inform Francois of Gouki's presence before bringing them there from the spirit folk village.

And so, after arriving at the Galarc Kingdom, Rio went through the usual procedures to enter the castle and headed for his mansion.

"I'll go and report our return. Everyone else, please stay here."

Rio took only Miharu and Celia and left the mansion for the main castle. Of course, his report went to Satsuki, Charlotte, and King Francois directly.

Francois was busy with government affairs, so it wasn't always possible to meet him right away, but Satsuki and Charlotte were probably available. He had asked for early notice to be sent while he was completing the entry procedure into the castle, so they might even be waiting for him at the castle entrance. Rio approached the front of the castle with such thoughts, when...

"Haruto! Miharu! Celia! Come quickly!"

It was Satsuki, but something was wrong. She was gesturing them over in a fret.

Rio and the others ran over. "What's the matter...?"

“Just come. It’s terrible... There’s a hero, who’s also a saint, in the castle right now, having an audience with the king. Hurry!”

Satsuki started running, tugging them along.

“A hero, who’s also a saint? I understand if she wants an audience with the king, but...”

What’s the problem with that? Satsuki was in such a panic; her explanation didn’t make sense. Until...

“She’s abducted Liselotte!”

At those words, Rio’s expression instantly stiffened.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, in a meeting room reserved for high-ranking royalty in the castle...

“This discussion is getting nowhere.”

“I was just thinking the same.”

Saint Erica and King Francois of Galarc were currently engaged in conversation. They sat facing each other in chairs on either side of the door, sighing heavily at each other.

“We just want you to return Liselotte without aggravating matters. Is it that disagreeable for you?” Francois suggested.

“Why must I be forced to accept that when I’m the victim? Liselotte Cretia’s subordinate laid her hands on me first, okay?” Erica said, turning down the suggestion curtly. Aria was standing in a corner of the room, glaring furiously at her. Liselotte’s parents, Cedric and Julianne, were also present. Erica met eyes with Aria and smirked.

“However, Liselotte’s attendant has given a different account. According to Aria’s testimony, you tried to harm Liselotte first.”

“You doubt the words of a hero?” Erica asked arrogantly.

“I will believe the testimony that matches Liselotte’s own account, as she has my trust. That is why I’m asking you to return her.”

“Isn’t that the same as doubting my words? If I return her, you’ll be able to make up as many excuses as you want.”

“Even if that were true, I’ve already said I do not wish to aggravate things... In that case, bring Liselotte here and have her testify herself.”

“You want me to bring my hostage into enemy territory? That’s the same

as saying to return her, is it not?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying. You can just bring her here. I only wish to confirm that she's safe."

"If I brought her here, you'd just make up reasons to hide her. Are you trying to force me into giving up? I'd like to see the fool who would take you up on such an offer."

"..." Francois sighed heavily.

It was at that moment that the door to the meeting room opened, and Satsuki appeared with Rio, Miharu, and Celia.

"Oh, your hero has returned as well," Erica looked at Satsuki and said, "along with...a rather cute Japanese girl, I see. I'm Saint Erica, leader of the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica. It's nice to meet you. Are you Satsuki's friend?" Erica spotted Miharu and started talking to her in a friendly manner. However...

"You can ignore her, Miharu," Satsuki whispered to Miharu in an irritated voice. Her voice should have been too quiet for Erica to hear.

"Why, so you're called Miharu. Written as 'beautiful spring,' I assume? Or is it written as 'three springs'? Just between you and me, my family name in Japan was written with the character for 'cherry blossom.' I think we could be good friends."

"What? No way, how could she hear that..."

"I could tell by the movement of your lips. I'm good at things like that," Erica revealed to Satsuki, who was shocked that she was overheard whispering Miharu's name.

"She may seem friendly at a glance, but this person abducted Liselotte. She keeps on refusing to return her too."

"Abduction? Don't spread false rumors. I was assaulted, so I simply took her into custody as a hostage. I'm just a small nation up against a major kingdom, after all," Erica added, sounding offended.

"Has there been any progress, Char?"

Satsuki brought Rio, Miharu, and Celia over to Charlotte, who shook her head sadly. "Unfortunately not."

"How about you state your demands already, Hero Saint Erica? This loop of refusing to return her to us is getting nowhere," Francois said, having reached the end of his patience.

"Oh, how could I forget? I have five directives to pass on to you. First, the

abolition of the monarchy. Second, the abolition of the nobility system. Third, to transfer the country to the people. Fourth, to transfer Liselotte Cretia to the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica. Fifth, to transfer the Ricca Guild's fortune and right of management to the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica."

That is all. Erica ended with a sunny expression.

"Are you being serious right now? How could I accept any of those conditions?"

Making such demands of another kingdom was as good as declaring war on them. Even Francois frowned severely at that.

"I don't expect you to accept them. However, I will make them happen. That's why they're not demands, but predetermined facts. It was hard to bring them up while you were trying to make negotiations, but I actually came here today to inform you of this. If you don't fulfill the conditions that I have presented, I will make them happen myself," Erica declared brightly.

Hero or not, as the ruler of the kingdom, Francois could no longer hold his silence in the face of such disrespect. "You're saying you will use force to abolish my kingdom's monarchy and nobility system? Shall I take that as a declaration of war from the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica?" he asked with a sharp look.

"Now that things have come to this, I suppose so? Did you want me to make a clearer act of hostility?"

"What...?"

"Hee hee. As I said earlier, I'm from a small nation. You're a major kingdom. Perhaps it would be better to take one more hostage," Erica said.

She turned to look at Charlotte, who was standing with the others by the wall. The next moment, she was on her feet and sprinting forward, materializing her Divine Arms while approaching Charlotte.

"..."

Before Erica could pin Charlotte from behind, Rio had grabbed her bishop's staff and stood before her.

"...Hm?"

Erica pushed her staff forward, intending on sending Rio flying together with Charlotte behind him. However, Rio had enhanced his body and held his ground against her physical strength. They were both putting a rather large amount of force into it, as their hands were trembling.

What amazing magic essence... She's enhancing her physical body a lot.

Rio looked at Erica and analyzed her silently. Behind him, Charlotte had taken the opportunity to cling to his back, but quickly retreated to avoid getting in his way. Meanwhile...

“You’ve got quite the muscles on you. Are you a knight? How wonderful,” Erica giggled, smiling gracefully.

“What shall I do, Your Majesty?” Rio asked Francois, who was still seated.

“She’s holding Liselotte hostage... If she doesn’t aggravate things further, have her leave quietly for today.”

“Understood,” Rio nodded. “Then...”

“Oh my...”

With her staff still held in her dominant hand, Erica suddenly lost her balance and fell forward. Rio pinned the handle with both hands, restraining her from moving freely. Rio had waited for the moment Erica put more force into her push and instantly used that momentum to pull the staff towards him.

“You used the strength I put in myself...” Erica tilted her head curiously, realizing Rio had shifted his center of gravity to splendidly use her strength against her.

“As expected of a major kingdom. Be it that attendant girl or this boy here, you have quite the selection of soldiers. How wonderful indeed.” Erica looked at Rio’s face once again, then continued with a look around the room. Aria was standing before Francois, her enchanted sword ready to protect him.

“You’ve been given the option to leave without causing any further trouble,” Rio said to the saint, still holding on to her staff. He was asking whether she had any intention of causing more problems.

“Challenging you to a duel seems like a terrible effort. Though I have no intention of causing trouble...”

Erica poured magic essence into her bishop’s staff as she spoke. The magic essence flowed through the staff pressed against the floor, spreading across its entire surface.

“Guh...” Rio immediately started preparing magic essence within his body as well. At the same time, Celia and Miharu, who could visibly see magic essence, also noticed the powerful magic being charged into the staff and looked shocked.

“How about this, then?” Erica released the magic essence she had charged into her staff and tried to activate some sort of phenomenon. The staff glowed

with divine light, and the floor started shining too. It was at that moment that the others realized Erica had poured magic essence into her staff, but...

"..."

Nothing happened. It was clear that Erica had tried to do something, so Francois and the others had doubtful looks on their faces. But the same applied for Erica.

"How strange... I put enough magic essence into the staff to destroy this room, but..."

"Wha..."

With her intentions revealed, the entire room was lost for words.

Erica gazed at Rio and threw out an accusation. "What did you do? Did you interfere with my Divine Arm? How did you do that?"

In reality, that was exactly what happened. Rio had used spirit arts to overwrite the phenomenon Erica had tried to manifest.

"..."

Francois and the others looked on with confusion and shock, holding their breaths. They couldn't understand what was going on, but they could tell a high-level battle was occurring between Rio and the saint before them.

"If you're ignoring His Majesty's words to aggravate the situation, should I assume you will not be returning quietly?"

Rio returned Erica's aggression with a sharp gaze. His words were polite, but his tone was chillingly cold.

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“Heh. Heh heh heh. In that case, I’m sure you understand Liselotte Cretia’s safety won’t be guaranteed. If I don’t return by a certain date, my people will sentence her,” Erica threatened with a fearless smile.

“...Then it would be best for you to return quietly. If you continue to act violently and risk everyone’s safety, I will have no choice but to apprehend you.”

It’s not what I desire, but is it what you desire? Rio implied with his gaze.

“...Fine. My role right now is to bestow a revelation upon the people of this nation. I can always eliminate the people here after the people have made their fury known. No, that is the correct order. It seems I nearly messed up in my haste. Now that I’ve fulfilled my original goal, I shall take my leave here.”

The mace in Erica’s hand vanished. She proceeded to raise her hands and show she had no wish to fight, then started walking towards the door. Rio tried to follow her to make sure she didn’t try anything strange, but Erica turned around and stopped him.

“If you follow me, I may end up making a mess of this castle. I’m sure you haven’t forgotten, but Liselotte Cretia is in my hands right now.”

As a result, Rio had no choice but to come to a halt. Everyone else’s angered gazes focused on Erica’s back, infuriated by how they couldn’t chase after her.

Eventually, Erica left the room, and as soon as the door shut, Rio spoke up.

“Your Majesty, please give me permission to pursue her,” he said to Francois.

“What...?”

Francois was wide-eyed.

“If we allow that saint to escape here, Liselotte might never return to us. I will pin down her location and retrieve her.” There was no hesitation in his eyes. He would save her. His determination was clear.

“Hmm... But you absolutely cannot be detected while pursuing her to find Liselotte’s location. Can you do that?”

The moment he was discovered, Liselotte would most likely never return again. Francois hummed in thought while staring at Rio but seemed to believe it would be possible if it were him.

“I can stalk her while maintaining a one-kilometer distance. If I go too far,

I'll lose sight of her, but I have a means of never losing sight of her within that distance. That's why there's a little leeway in time, but please make a decision soon," Rio answered.

Aishia, it's an emergency. Stay in your spirit form and follow the black-haired woman about to leave the castle.

At the same time, he called out to Aishia telepathically without waiting for Francois's permission.

Got it, came her immediate reply.

Thanks.

All that was left was to actually set off after her. Rio looked straight at Francois and waited for his answer.

"There's one thing I'd like to ask of Lady Satsuki."

"What is it?"

"If the saint takes an aggressive stance, will you be willing to make an official statement as a hero that our kingdom was not at fault?" Francois asked, seeking her assistance.

The Strahl region viewed the heroes as sacred beings, so if things were to take a serious turn with a hero, they'd need another hero on their side. As someone burdened with the welfare of a kingdom, this was something he had to confirm first.

"Of course. You don't even need to ask. There's no way I'd forgive someone like that." Satsuki must have made up her mind about the saint, as her reply was instant.

"All right... Then Liselotte's rescue shall be left to Haruto. Fine with you, Cedric?"

Francois nodded deeply, giving Rio permission to rescue Liselotte. He then turned to Liselotte's father, Cedric, for confirmation.

"Please take care of this, Haruto." Cedric closed his eyes uneasily but ultimately bowed his head.

"I will do my best."

"We're counting on you," Francois said, entrusting everything to Rio.

"And so, please explain everything to the others for me." Rio nodded deeply in response to Francois, then turned to Miharu, Celia, Satsuki, and Charlotte beside him to rely on them for the rest.

"Yup... Be careful."

"Make sure you come back safely."

“Please take care of Liselotte, Haruto.”

Celia, Miharu, and Satsuki looked at Rio with worry.

“I shall await your return, Sir Haruto.” Charlotte pinched the hem of her dress up and saw Rio off resolutely.

“Leave it to me. I’ll definitely bring her back.” Rio smiled to reassure the four of them, then started walking out of the room to go after the saint.

“Wait.”

“What is it?”

Just before he left the room, Francois called for him to stop. Rio paused before the door.

“We’ve basically been handed a clear declaration of war. Lady Satsuki has also given her seal of approval. It no longer matters whether our opponent is a hero or a saint. If they pursue you after the rescue, you may use your own discretion to act. Bring out all of your strength if you need to.”

Make them regret picking a fight with us—Francois gave permission for Rio to cross swords with the saint as though to say exactly that. The fact it was coming from the king himself also had huge implications.

“Understood.” Rio bowed his head deeply and left the room.

“If I may please make a request unworthy of my standing.” The voice of a woman echoed in the meeting room.

Epilogue: Companion

After leaving the meeting room, Rio walked leisurely towards the entrance of the castle so that he wouldn't catch up to Erica. Along the way, he confirmed with the knights that she had passed by.

Haruto, a black-haired woman is approaching the gate. I'll continue to follow her after she leaves.

Then, Aishia made contact.

Apparently she really was going to leave the castle quietly.

Thank you. Let me know if anything happens. I'll follow within range of our telepathic connection.

Got it.

Rio made his way out of the castle while communicating with her. Saint Erica should have been going through the castle gate two hundred meters in front of him right now.

"Please wait!"

Just at that moment, a voice called out from behind Rio, and its owner ran up to him. She must have been in a hurry, as she was breathing a little heavily.

"Aria...?"

Rio's eyes widened. He was surprised by the fact she had chased after him, but what was more surprising was her clothes. Instead of her usual attendant's uniform, she was dressed in what looked like adventurer clothes. Why?

"I'm begging you," Aria began with a serious expression.

"For what...?"

Rio had a hunch what her request would be. And while he was thinking about whether that request was right or not...

"Please allow me to accompany you on the mission to rescue Lady Liselotte."

Aria bowed her head low before Rio, pleading.

Goldenagato

Afterword

Hello everyone, this is Yuri Kitayama. Thank you for picking up *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles, volume 17, Saint's Gospel*.

So, we've finally reached volume 17. Normally, sales of earlier volumes tend to drop when a series comes this far, but the first wave of *Spirit Chronicles* continues to rise. It's all thanks to you!

Thanks to your support, the third drama CD "Script with a Side of Heroine Ranking" has been included in the special edition of volume 17. To those of you who bought it, please enjoy the comical interaction between Rio and the heroines!

Next, and this has already been announced elsewhere, but two new pieces of *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles* merchandise will be going on sale! There's a body pillow cover of Professor Celia and Professor Celia's perfume!

Body pillow aside, apparently it's really rare to have perfume produced. I never thought I'd have a part in making perfume in my life, so it was a valuable experience. The body pillow cover of Professor Celia is so adorable, I just want to hug her tightly (there's a version with her regular clothes in disarray, and a version in a swimsuit), and the perfume has a great scent as well. Please consider buying them if you're interested!

The details of the body pillow and perfume have already been released, which you can find on the official sites for HJ Bunko and Melon Books, as well as my Twitter account (by the time this volume is released, preorders should be open).

Finally, I'd like to say a little something about the main story as well. Rio, Aria, and Aishia are teaming up for volume 18. The story is finally moving on to the next stage.

I'll be able to talk about more details in the upcoming volumes regarding the saint's surprising resilience and other things, so look forward to that alongside the story! (I'm so glad they got out of Yagumo in volume 7...!)

Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles, volume 18, Beast of the Land will be

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on sale this winter!

Let’s meet again in volume 18!

Yuri Kitayama
July 2020

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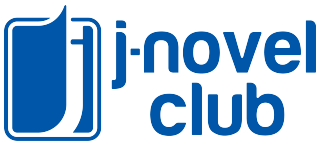

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